Spark of Creation

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The end of what was then was the beginning of what is now, the truth recalled only by those left orphaned outside reality. To restore what was is beyond the ken of mortals; only a desperate plan with the wildest chance can see this path begun. Fortunately for the Multiverse, one blonde ninja has always had a lucky streak…

Status: complete

Published: 2015-04-29

Words: 183755

Chapters: 16

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Humor/Friendship - Characters: Naruto U., Chandra N., Jace B. - Reviews: 14 - Favs: 198 - Follows: 107

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11217239/1/Spark-of-Creation

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

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Chapter 1

Spark of Creation

A/N: IMPORTANT - THIS FIC IS VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL TO CHAPTER 24 OF MY OTHER FIC 'WIN SOME, LOSE SOME'!

After receiving some constructive feedback saying this work was a little too long for a single chapter as well as being more MTG than Naruto, I've decided to republish it as a multi-chapter crossover rather than a standalone piece. Hopefully this'll make it easier to read and enjoy; I've also rewritten minor bits to make it flow better and aside from that I only just realised I've currently got 13 published stories; I'm superstitious, so sue me!

Hope you all enjoy this piece but I've been away from the site a while; if you think I should delete this as a chapter from 'Win Some, Lose Some' please let me know ASAP; last thing I want to do is tread on the moderators' toes so soon after a long break!

For Reference:

"speech."

" **bijuu speech** "

; thoughts ;

" *telepathy and/or emphasis and/or technique name."*

Enjoy the multi-planar show!

Chapter 1 - Fortune Bears Fruit

Kyuubi's last action was to notice the ripple.

All was going dark around him, the chakra he'd forced into his idiot host nearly extinguished. Snarling, the bijuu braced himself to send another pulse through the iron-hard seal when the water before his cage suddenly shook, a single ripple spreading outwards in the water beneath him. Dismissing it and setting himself to preserving both his (and, unfortunately, his hosts') life it happened again, and again, the humans' mindscape shaking. ***Impossible*** *; he wasn't dying, he better than anyone knew the Shinigami's touch;* ***what is this? And what…*** ; *the water, tears his mortal bearer had never cried, was draining away as impossible, unearthly light shone from beneath it.*

Scrambling backwards the giant fox heard his cage creak, felt rumblings beneath and tensed to spring - whatever this mental earthquake was if it weakened or broke the hated blonde humans' seal he'd take his freedom like a shot - before the floor below him pitched. Stumbling, Kyuubi was left aghast as the floor beneath his paws crumbled, the light below it thrashing like a pinned worm; suddenly fearful he jumped, as high as he could, trying like his host to avoid the inevitable but unable to stave it forever. The light reared up and by its touch the false veneer was stripped away, the truth was remembered and the final step in a plan eons long was completed, sheer chance at last reaping rich rewards. The Kyuubi ceased to be and its progenitor quickly opened the gate, dragging itself beyond the veil and into the forgotten, a place the one it had found would soon begin to undo. Its arrival did not go unnoticed and soon the shadows conversed, their whispers heard by the one brought into this unreality as the boy dreamed of what had been.

The search was over, the rebuilding was nigh; after an instant and an eternity of travelling with strangers and wandering alone a new pair of eyes opened, saw the debris and began the long, laborious task of both setting thing right in the present and sowing the seeds of a better future. Heeding the shadows of what had been he gave form to the shapeless, speaking where words were needed and making bargains where possible but always with one eye upon the future, both of his work and those he had journeyed with unseen.

As the first strands of insanity were dragged into the material world and set in their proper place, as deals were made, an old friend of the child's tracked down and plans formulated, the first step upon an impossible trek was taken and a desire eons old finally approached fulfilment…

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 - The First Steps

Step 1 - A Rough Meeting

To reach the earth, to understand its voice and the strength with was a journey not easily undertaken; even for the Joraga, greatest of the first race of the Multiverse it was a trial. She had sat under the shade of a cool tree without water or food for almost a full day bringing the long-repeated mantras to the edge of her tongue, seeking to liberate herself from the shackles of flesh and reach oneness with the jungles of her home. She was close; already she could sense the other two stood sentinel over her, tasked with protecting her helpless form while she sought guidance from the fractious plane…

… when an almighty crash from somewhere very close by made the ground jump.

Her concentration snapped and she shot upright, stem-sword already in her hand despite the sundering from her meditative trance making her feel ill. Wrestling the sensation down and angry with herself for failing Nissa Revane flew after her guardians as they pushed through the surrounding foliage to confront whatever beast had intruded on the Joraga tribe grounds, mana from the forest already winding around her stave. Not a leaf rustled, no twig cracked underfoot as the trio of elves rushed towards the disturbance, a terrible breaking and crunching erupting in the near distance along with; Nissa paused, agitated and confused as her protectors looked back at her; a voice,

"And stay down this time"; *human* ; her lip curled in distaste - would the lesser races never learn their place was where their betters couldn't hear or see them?

"Honestly why do I always get the stubborn ones - the rest were all to happy to go but noooo, you had to be difficult - get going, go on get," her guards fell back, spears drawn as Nissa readied herself; there was mana on the air as she crept forwards cautiously, sensing something large being moved against its will, ribbons of the mana of the sea dragging it away, "and stay in there this time. Now where am I; uh, hello, anyone out there?"

An elf as blind would be smothered at birth; the human was looking almost directly at her and still saw nothing. She would have been tempted to leave it to the jungle but lingering nausea and irritation that the human had cost her time and patience had her subtly invoke the ground under the stupid animal; it barely had time to feel surprise before creepers erupted and entrapped it,

"Whoa, hey what the - oh," it finally saw her as she stepped forwards, the power of life flowing through her as she appraised her captive, "this yours? Nice but this really isn't my thing, not on the first date - couldn't we just have a picnic instead?"

"You trespass on Joraga lands human," Nissa stated simply, guilt and verdict as one as she gestured to the hunters at her shoulder, "drag the carcass away and leave it for the ants." The surprise on the beasts' face was so profound it was almost comical,

"What; hey come on, I didn't want to be here either! I was flown by here by, uh - well you can't see it now, I got rid of it. Hey are those spears in your hands or are you just pleased to see… they're really spears aren't they? Hey, Princess, you with the green war paint and vine-fetish," having put the matter from her mind Nissa didn't even look over her shoulder, "fine, ignore me then but I won't forget this - we'll have a reckoning one day."

It was beneath an elf to scoff but the declaration by the doomed woman made her come perilously close, at least until there was a small flood of mana followed by a splash behind her. Her captive was gone, the trap empty and the two hunters knelt in apology, ready for their punishment of not heeding her commands fast enough and

losing their leader her kill. Nissa bade them rise, sensing nothing nearby and wanting to return to her meditations before night came; the human was gone but likely not far, she would be swallowed by the jungle and forgotten as all but its masters were. Returning to her tree and trance the elf once more sought to connect to deeper forces, putting all else from her empty mind to attain her true attunement to the forces that made her race the true masters of all the planes.

Several days later, when she returned to the home of her empty shell, she had all but forgotten the human had ever existed and cast the warning from her mind entirely.

Step 2 - Prime the Machine.

For the first time the five were together as one; each with their own visions of the ultimate blessed state but, for now, united by the insistence of one of their number. Leaving their regular dealings to their hands and exarches the praetors of the Machine were assembled beneath the crust of the hollow world, each within eyeshot of the others and scheming furiously save one, the one who had called them who was absent. High-pitched chitterings and squeals of binary broke the silence until, at least, all within the hallowed chamber sensed the missing one coming,

"He is late," contrary to her title the black praetor didn't whisper, "the Grand Compleation stalls."

"He will know punishment," the leader of the Machine Orthodoxy assured her ebon sister as the connectors into this sacred room slithered open, all four praetors watching the errant one enter before with a metallic roar the most powerful of them rose, smashing the ground around him to powder,

"He is not-us!" Vorinclex demanded, his booming echoed by the sinister hisses of the others as the leader of the blue-aligned Phyrexians took his seat, a tall, shadowy figure in his wake. Blades distended from hidden cavities, flensing knives extended without a

whisper as the four looked upon the newcomer before Jin-Gitaxias spoke,

"Calm," his voice was oddly distorted but only Urabrask, gifted rudimentary emotions by the mana he was tied to, understood the distortion for awe, "the not-us is here for the Compleation."

"That is impossible; he is not-us."

"And you are not Phyrexians," the stranger, tall, thin but composed of weak flesh, spoke for the first time, apparently unconcerned about being locked in a room with five of the most deadly creatures on a world of corrupted killing machines, "I have spoken to the Father of Machines, none of you will reach your goal."

"Traitor," there was no inflection in the voice issuing from the Grand Cenobite's helm, there was only cold fact, "you have sinned against our Father, you will be explicated." The blue praetor sneered as much as a machine could,

"That thing on the throne is not our Father, the not-us has shown me that," he stood, bared spine clicking ominously, "our Father is dead and we are orphans."

Silence met this declaration; such blasphemy did not compute. Before any of the other praetors could speak the one who had made the most logical of them see such a thing raised his voice,

"Your Father is gone but his voice lingers," the not-us's eyes were flat and as cold as any of the robotic ones following him, recording every detail, "echoes are all around us, echoes few can hear."

"The dead speak," Sheoldred assured him, her newest shell clicking as its installed projectile weapons chambered and were trained on the threat, "there is much to be gleaned from them." The not-us chuckled, the sound reverberating grimly in the dark chamber,

"Who here knows the story of the Legacy, the doom of your Father?" He stared down each of the praetors in turn and all were forced to nod; the history of Phyrexia was a part of them none could excise, "He has gone beyond mere death, only echoes of his voice linger. Echoes I have heard, echoes I have told your brother," Jin nodded slightly at the recognition, "echoes that tell me none of your plans, of hunger, of experimentation, of orthodoxy, will truly fulfil His vision."

"Your words are not His," Norn was the first to denounce this blasphemy against her creed, "you cannot speak for our Father."

"Nor can you; you weren't carved by His hand. Yawgmoth is gone but He has sensed you, his children reborn, and through me he will see perfection crafted."

Before the praetors could speak the not-us inclined his head; none of them sensed the mana he channelled for he channelled none; there were no lights, no flashes of inspiration, just silence as the voice of a long-destroyed god reached his orphaned children. The five praetors, save Jin-Gitaxais who'd heard the message before, were left stunned, almost off-line as the destroyed planeswalkers' message was heeded and understood - even from the fractious Urabrask there could be no rebellion against their true Father. Standing as one, the council addressed the not-us,

"Where must we go?"

"The surface, the Vault of Whispers."

"When?"

"Now."

"How many?" The not-us paused, then looked up through eyes that had looked upon the true Machine-God,

"All."

The praetors scrambled to obey, the message already shrieked out in their maddening machine-cant; the Father had spoken, the Grand Compleation was at hand. Left alone in the corrupted chamber the not-us was ignored, the tool the Father of Machine would use left to its own devices. The man glanced down and, sensing he was alone, sighed slightly, breaking his mask for just an instant; even to monsters such as these it felt wrong to lie, especially when they were only monsters simply because they'd been made that way. Still there was nothing to be done about it now; this madness had to end and end well and if that meant tricking these homicidal killing machines into believing he spoke with the voice of their god, so be it.

It was a small price to pay to end a terrible blight on the Multiverse, potentially gain new allies for his own ends and, albeit twistedly, complete the goals of a long-dead madman.

Step 3 - Exit Stage Left.

Riding with the assurance of a born noblewoman she realised what had caused her steed to buck and groaned; it had been going so well. Trust the stupidity of nature to ruin an otherwise simple mission…

"Shoo," she demanded, a delicately-manicured hand trying to dissuade the stubborn beast from attacking, "trust me, I'll be the last meal you ever go for." The horned, well-fanged thing merely growled, taking a pace forwards before stopping, the mounted necromancer also becoming aware of a faint noise getting closer - it sounded like… clanking?

"Dee-dee-diddley-dee," a humming sprang up from the bushes off to the left, "a mighty fine one was she; eyes of jade and lips of red; the steps inviting upwards led; the vittles finished and so to bed; oh what a night for me," her lips twitched at the bawdy ballad and idly she wondered who'd be first to the kill, her or the predator now trained on the rustling thickets, "how does that second verse go? De-de, no

that's not it; ah finally, knew that road had to be around here somewhere."

Two bites and it'll be over ; never one to shy from death the black-aligned planeswalker merely watched as the oblivious old man, completely ridiculous with his short-sleeved shirt, long shorts and oversized pack lined with a variety of tied-on pans, forced himself onto the path between her and the hunting beast. She would have let things play out but her horse had other ideas, a snort enough to catch the old man's ear, his collection of pans rattling like dancing skeletons as he turned, saw her and started,

"Ah, 'pologies," he gave as much of a bow as his pack would allow, doffing his battered hat, "didn't see there was a lady present. Now miss; what was that?" His stubbly grey moustache quivered as he slewed around again and finally realised his peril, the beast now pacing towards him hungrily,

"No, back you monster back"; *if he dies I'm raising him* ; she decided, blocking out the clamour as her would-be saviour unhooked two pans and started beating them together; *purely for entertainment* ; "you will not harm the lady." It certainly wouldn't, she'd survived much worse than a flea-riddled brute but she doubted her would-be saviour would be as fortunate - completely unperturbed by the racket the creature was stalking the old man one pace at a time, his noise ceasing as he realised it was doing little good. Suddenly he let out a scream and pelted back the way he'd come, the animal tearing after him with a roar that quickly faded.

He was fast for an old man - ah, the power of blind terror. Still ; she applied a touch of the reins to get her steed moving, watching for signs that she was approaching her goal; *a minor delay, Kothophed can afford it. That temple should be around here somewhere and what's within will get that demon off my back…*

Step 4 - Pick a Pocket.

"Azors, quiet!"

The warning came too late, already all within the chamber could hear booted feet and raised voices; she looked down, squeezing her eyes shut; her guild might have accepted her promise never to use her killing glare at her word but few others would. The clamour rose, the Golgari about her whispering furtively, some of the children crying and being hushed by the others as finally the last door fell open, harsh light spilling in and highlighting the threatening silhouettes,

"Quiet!" The figure at the front of them, a captain of the Azorius guild, demanded, gazing at the assembled rabble with undisguised contempt, "You are all under arrest."

"Why?" Someone shouted back and she wished she had such courage; the captains' face made it clear whoever had challenged him would likely regret it later,

"I've a writ of the Boros," he bellowed, brandishing a paper aloft, "and it demands all Golgari in this stink-hole be transported to a designated resettlement facility. Now come quietly or we take you by force." None spoke, few hardly dared breathe and she felt the walls close in until, at last, the dreadful tension as shattered by a sudden call,

"That's not a writ; it's a poster!"

The surprise made her look up suddenly, an act that might have gotten her executed outside the slums. However even at this distance she could clearly see the document, emblazoned with a grinning, decapitated head, a signature of the Rakdos carnival. The captain of the invaders glancing at the paper he held and paling, grasping at his belt,

"The writ, where is it?" He didn't have long to look as a stinking missile whizzed over his head,

"Get out, you've no power without your paper; get out!" The cry was taken up, the unkempt crowd surging forwards, the arresting soldiers powerless without their stamped shield. The captain, already covered in evil-smelling manure and less-wholesome substances, bellowed a retreat and swore flayings for all unless that writ was found. They quickly ran out of sight, the jubilant Golgari left with their victory and cheering before they began running for pre-arranged bolt-holes, scattering before the Azorius could reappear. *That was fortunate* ; one of the few things in her life that had been as she ran with the Swarm, looking to get out of the way; *so let's not squander it!*

She reached her hidden door first and wrenched it open, letting the others shuffle past first as she was stronger than most of her guildmates, most of them muttering thanks as they escaped under her arm even if they wouldn't meet her face. Suddenly the door was light in her hand, the words,

"I've got it, go," breathed into her ear and making her symbiotes lash out agitated, caught by surprise by the unexpected presence. The gorgon didn't ask twice, setting off into the darkness and safety, only glancing over her shoulder to check her saviour was on her heels. She saw a glimpse of a face, not one she recognised from the Swarm, regarding her fearlessly and even shooting her a wink before letting the portal fall closed, the sight making the gorgon stumble - even amongst the Golgari few would meet her gaze. She thought about returning, asking the woman who she was but fear of the unknown and that the Azorius might return made her speed on, mouthing a silent prayer the woman would get away safely. She retreated to the shadows, her guild celebrating their escape and laughing at the pomposity of the Azorius but she didn't join in for long, preferring her solitude and to thank the stranger in her own way.

With her potential still dormant the gorgon had no way of knowing that, after checking all the Swarm had dispersed and barring the hidden door from her side, the Golgaris' saviour had unhooked a

piece of parchment from her belt, skimmed the writing and the judges' seal and then burnt it to ashes in her fist; *just as well I stuck around this place - the judges here are insane! Still, their Dimir might be good but they've never met a ninja before - punishment for something these people had no control over* ; old memories swirled like tar before they were quelled and the figure faded away; *not this time!*

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 - The Lightning Thief.

The eldest and greatest planeswalker, the Lord of the Blind Eternities and stronger than he ever had been since the conflux of Alaria; his was the name whispered, feared and paid homage to across a thousand planes, totems costing entire bloodlines of craftsmen raised to honour his magnificence. His plans spanned the ages, for another to try and unpick his multitudinous schemes would send them eternally mad; his was the glory, the knowledge and the ultimate power…

… and now, Nicol Bolas was unamused.

After testing his new and terrible abilities following the conflux of Alaria the Elder Dragon had returned to his meditation realm, awaiting news from his spies and cat's-paws. It had been going well, those planes-wrecking abominations unshackled at his command even as the pitiful half-machines reassembled themselves like dolls pulled apart and yet, and yet there was something recently amiss. Zendikar still stood and the peons of the mad Machine-King were vanished without trace, his minions unable to explain this sudden shift despite his most insistent urgings. The dragon hated nothing more than ignorance, especially his own, so he had left his realm to assuage his frustrations, his shadow spreading across a dozen worlds and leaving all remembering why he was a being to be feared. The destruction, however, assuaged him little; something had changed, something just beyond his reach and he hated it; the mists clung to him, the Eternities no longer bent at his whim as they should. And now this, awaiting him in the bones of his greatest challenger; as he emerged atop the Talon Gates his shadow fell over the upstart interloper who squinted, then looked up,

"Do you mind? You're in my light."

Audacity had its place, usually under his clawed foot, but it was possible the child had been struck dumb by his mere presence; it had happened often enough in the past. However Bolas saw a little deeper, past the skin to the soul and smiled; when this was over he'd have another planeswalker under his sway. The earth shook as he descended, graceful despite his age and, for a dragon, unusual appearance,

"Do you know who I am child?" With a snap the boy closed the book he was reading,

"Yep," he stood up, his journal hanging from a thick chain looped over one shoulder as he faced the dragon without fear, an impressive feat, "Nicol Bolas, owner of far too many titles to name and more arrogance than the entire Uchiha clan put together."

His patience ended and with it the childs' life, consumed in roaring fire; watching as the blaze died down the dragon snorted, the worm already gone from his mind when a slow clap sounded from the other side of the Talon Gates. Growling, Bolas unleashed a stream of caustic black mana that steamed off the stone as the other planeswalker vanished, reappearing a safe distance away with arms folded, regarding the dragon contemptuously,

"God of the wyrm-kind, you answer for your crimes now," he called, voice projecting far beyond what a human should have been capable of, "I challenge you to a duel." Bolas's smile was malice given form, lightning and fire crackling in his jaws as he laughed darkly,

"I commit no crimes human, I just enforce my will; so be it, I accept," the dragon pushed himself into the sky, roaring at his grounded foe, "after you are dead I will wring your origins from your miserable soul and obliterate the plane that birthed you. Your fate will serve as a warning to those who would dare challenge me!" The human chuckled, seemingly unphased by the doom hovering above him,

"You have a habit of leaving messages Bolas; never heard the saying arrogance will get you killed? It's time for your reckoning

wyrm," mana flared and suddenly there were many strangers, so many the dragon couldn't tell them easily apart as the small army shrieked its defiance, "time the arrogant failure paid for his mistakes!"

With a keening scream Bolas descended, the earth under the Gates flaring at its masters' command as he plunged into the attack, seeking to end this mad, miserable wretch and his farcical claims.

The farce, however, proved not easily resolved; the strange 'walker summoned nothing, evidently knowing it would be used against him by the dragons' peerless control of blue mana, but continually replicated himself, the mana constructs able to dodge the destruction Bolas reined upon them. Trying to search their minds, normally so easy with short-lived men, was useless, they broke into mana at any contact lighter than a touch. Frustrated the dragon summoned a swarm of minor minions, seeking to drown the clones in numbers and learn their tactics at the same time. They used mana of every hue, burning, drowning or slashing his creations apart and even daring to launch puny weapons at him, a laughable thought as he summoned the air itself to protect his glittering scales. The other planeswalker did not fighting as his more august predecessors had before the rifts had dimmed each spark. *As well he should not* ; the elder 'walkers had stood before him, confident in their superiority until his touch had shattered their minds and left them drooling husks; *this one knows his only chance is guile. Unfortunately for him even that* ; he concentrated for an instant, jaws widening as he saw his land-bound foes freeze, sensing what was coming next even as he released his spell; *is useless against my power!*

Catastrophe was unleashed, the land scoured by fire and wind together, the firestorm engulfing all within twenty leagues; *either he dies or is left with nowhere to run* . The dragon hoped for the latter; this foe had been frustrating and only a long, drawn out death for this upstart would assuage those frustrations. As the fire died down there was nothing left, no trace of his enemy remained even as he swept over the battlefield, blue mana lighting his eyes. He hadn't sensed

his opponent dying or 'walking away; *not that he could, I gave him no permission to leave* ; but if he was hiding it was in a place the dragon couldn't see. *Curiouser and curiouser* ; alighting gently the dragon swept his gaze around, quite prepared shatter the plane to dust until he ran his prey down - he had a secret, a spell or technique the dragon didn't know of and Nicol Bolas was nothing if not good at putting secrets to better use than those who made them.

He was also good, despite his size and metal-hard scales, at noticing minor sensations; the tap on his foreleg was insignificant, barely a gnat's touch but he reacted immediately, a mere buffet of his arm enough to throw his opponent backwards as his touch did its deadly work. Seeing the child thrown backwards and stagger slowly to a knee, all he had ever learnt lost under the tyrants' claw, Bolas grinned,

"This duel is over," he declared, "when you piece your mind together you will have a choice little 'walker. You can tell me what I wish to know and die painfully or," his crocodilian jaws craned forwards, sizzling sulphur splashing on the scorched earth below, "you can try to put up some pitiful resistance that I will spend aeons breaking before you spend aeons more begging for death."

"You," the child spoke feebly, one hand on his chained book as he came to his feet, not able to look at the victor of their fight, "you are right about one thing Bolas, this duel is over. Do you feel it yet great dragon; while you felt me burn under a touch that was never yours did you even realise that you were touched in turn? You took my mind, but what did you lose in exchange?"

"You are mad, as is to be expected," the dragon answered, quelling the slight unease in the back of his mind; he was Nicol Bolas, the questions of lesser beings did not trouble him, "I will enjoy vivisecting your soul human, it will bring me more joy and curiosity than I've had in a century."

"Then come," the child beckoned, defiant to the last, "claim it if you can." He vanished and Bolas smirked; he enjoyed a good chase

and, with his mind broken, the fool would lead him only to the places he would best remember, the places Bolas would drown and boil before his horrified eyes. Seeing the planeswalkers' trail with contemptuous ease the Lord of the Blind Eternities commanded them open the way to his quarry…

… and nothing happened.

What? ; the unease came again, redoubled as the dragon lashed his tail in frustration, the child's voice in his mind again as once more he tried to breach the barrier and it rebuffed him. Even as the unthinkable began to come into his mind he felt the Eternities open from the other side and turned, roaring a sheet of lightning at his returning opponent. It splashed and was dispersed by an invisible shield, the boy standing atop one of the Talons looking down at the dragon with naught but contempt in his stormy blue eyes,

"Do you feel it yet dragon?"

"What have you done?" It wasn't a question, it was a demand,

"What was given can be taken away," came the solemn intonation, "you have abused that which was never yours and slain the one who gave it to you. Now you pay, for that death and all others caused by your arrogance and greed," he held up one hand, a flicker of something impossible bright stretched between thumb and pinkie finger,

"No," at the bottom of his oceanic tyranny the dragon was still one of the most intelligent beings in the Multiverse; his brilliant mind leapt to a guess at what the other 'walker held even if it was impossible, "you cannot… !"

His opponent clenched his fist, the spark within was snuffed to nothingness and Nicol Bolas screamed.

Agony was all, the pain eternal and he was lost within it; he pleaded for it to end, to die as many had under his cruel claws but, like them, his wish was denied. The will common to all things, that of pure survival kept him alive and enduring until, after forever, his mind breached the skein of torture, filtering to the body that contained it. He felt weak, a state so alien he mistook himself for dead until he saw through blurred vision the imperious form of his vanquisher,

"H…" it was a death-rattle, a pale mockery of what his voice had once been, "how…?"

"It was necessary," the planeswalker said colourlessly, "stand, if you can." Bolas snarled, as much as he could; his limbs shook with fatigue as he laboriously made it to his feet, barely able to hold himself upright. Something clicked off his fore claws and he glanced down, head swimming with vertigo as he saw his crowning glory lying in the dust, the Gem of Becoming cracked and useless,

"I drained the excess mana from you, that's the reason you're not dead," his vanquisher informed him dispassionately, "for all the destruction you caused you did do some good. Good for your own selfish reasons but good nevertheless - for that you can keep your life."

"Why?" Mercy, though he occasionally employed it, was not one of Bolas's strongest suites, "You've taken my spark," he felt the loss as normal being would a missing limb, "kill me."

"No, I'm a ninja and a maker, not a murderer; we go now," bonds of mana encased the weakened dragon and, enfeebled, he was helpless to resist, hoisted into the air and away for the scene of his greatest conquest. Manipulating his prisoner with one hand, the victorious planeswalker glanced away to the massive edifice and raised his free arm, his tone for the first time tinged with emotion,

"That which you raised from your victim being shall be no more, that idea will be forgotten," the last thing Bolas saw of the plane was a ripple of nothingness, the Talon Gates collapsing into grainy rubble

and knowing that, this time, he was powerless to raise them again as reality split around his conqueror, a last word left in his wake,

"Farewell."

The boy dragged him to his Meditation Realm, passing through the wards he had placed around it as if they did not exist, and undid his invisible bonds. Bolas merely slumped to the ground, the void that had once been his limitless mana seeming to consume him whole and making his desperate for any scrap that could fill it, even those begged from his deadliest enemy,

"Who are you?"

"I am who you could have been Bolas, had fate been kinder and you less cruel," the boy looked up at him with strange eyes, eyes that spoke of limitless depths and unknowable things that dwelt within them, "you were given a gift denied your brothers and sisters, you ascended where they fell. The spark I crushed should never have been made; nothing should exist that embodies enlightenment, destruction and the rending of the Eternities as that did. It was the hope of a great idea, a hope dashed when it chose you to be its host."

"Host to a created spark? We are born with the potential or we are not, there is no choice."

"You were chosen to bear that spark, it was given when you lay with your brothers and sisters as an egg," the stranger assured him, his monotonous voice strangely compelling though, bereft of his powers, the dragon could not tell if he was being placed under an enchantment of any kind, "honed from the sparks of those lost within the Eternities and forged to undo the end, it was given to one who could, and would, be the greatest planeswalker to ever exist. It was powerful beyond reckoning, even latent it granted you the strength of your caress and your intellect, gifted amongst your peers. When it awoke fully you were as a god and you abused its power," there was

no condemnation, more regret as the human went on, "its creator came to reclaim it and you slew him because you knew no better, the first and greatest planeswalker duel. Your life, in a way, mirrors my own; we were both chosen to bear a great burden, only I was told of mine; before you knew of yours it was too late, the damage had already been done."

Bolas understood little of what he was being told, all he knew was that his pride was shattered and his power gone; he could plot and scheme still but without being able to breach the Eternities it was all for naught. Age and weariness had crept over him, the centuries his spark had held at bay now exacting their revenge but he was an Elder Dragon, the last of his kind, and even now he would not tolerate pity,

"Leave me," he demanded, turning away; he sensed the other presence leave and shambled back into his lair, the heart of his now-static realm. Slumping to the floor he let sleep come quickly, the slumber of his kind deep and dreamless, untouchable even to pain and humiliation as deep as he had suffered. As he rested in the heart of his library the Multiverse continued to spin, unknowing and perhaps uncaring that the last of the greatest race of beings it would ever know had finally faded forever.

Sad, but necessary ; glancing at the hand that had crushed the spark the former ninja couldn't help but feel a twinge of anguish - despite the dragons' cruelty and undeniable arrogance, crippling him in such a manner was in some ways worse than sparing his life; *but I'm no killer, not any more - I don't create and destroy only when necessary. So, that's about all those I 'walked… hmm* ; his thoughts were cut off as those he was both master of, servant to and partners with whispered, their word merely part of the surrounding madness to any but him, who was forever changed to live half-within, half-without the Eternities; *a little faster than I'd expected but, I can deal. And it's them* ; names of familiar strangers piqued his interest and made him

bless his luck again; *so, a change to bury another hatchet here then, if I'm quick - now, what is it that needs to go near Ravnica…?*

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 - Spark of Creation

"Enter."

Perhaps it was a bad habit but those in his employ were well-used to his quirks; the assistant he recognised by aura far before sight let themselves in without giving the knock he'd foreseen,

"Master, someone at the door for you."

"I wasn't expecting a call; if it's any of the guild representatives… no, it's not," his telepathy was now so strong he read unguarded minds almost without meaning to, though he'd more or less learned to block out the babble, "I'll see to her. Set wards over the libraries, just in case."

"And the laboratory?"

"Already warded," a telekinetic pulse sent the book he'd been reading back to his desk, "you left her in the lobby?"

"I did master, somewhat expediently I'm ashamed to say;" the mage smiled, patting the other man on the shoulder as he walked past,

"She has that effect on people; lock the door behind me."

"Very well," he said no more, he didn't need to; though that business with the Consortium was thankfully behind him his star had somewhat risen due to it and few crossed him now; *well, few here anyway. It's always those from other places* ; remembering the interloper he'd seen in his servants' memories Jace Beleren mentally recanted a few of his favoured illusions and counters, preparing himself for a reckoning a long time in the making against someone he'd rather not reckon with.

She saw him first; even before the main door safeguarding his townhouse clanged shut behind him she'd broken the silence,

"You took your time," with a puff of greasy smoke the trio of flickering fireballs around her fingers snuffed out, something the Ravnican nodded at,

"Your control's improved, shame about your temper, though I wonder what the Izzet would pay to know what happened to their gauntlet prototype," red glasses flashed as the woman stepped forwards menacingly but he ignored the threat, "why are you here Nalaar?"

"Not for the scenery; I need a bookworm."

"Charmed," Jace sighed, inwardly grateful she didn't want a duel; *after all, we hardly parted on the best of terms* ; "how did you find me?"

"Went 'walking 'til I got lucky, been at it a while now - listen I don't like you, let's get that out the way but there's a chance I, er," Jace cocked his head; he'd reigned in his powers partially out of respect for the other planewalker and partially because reading a mind as volatile as hers gave him a terrible headache but just by looking he could tell something was amiss, something Chandra's next words only confirmed, "I've seen something, I don't know what it is and I need someone who does, quick."

"I see," he replied after a second, "what…?"

"Not here," she cut him off, glancing around suspiciously, "where's the nearest bar?"

"The, what?"

"Bar, tavern, inn," she snapped, sparks snapping the ends of her braids, "less you want something heard the noisier place you need."

"Chandra Nalaar, are you inviting me for a drink?" *If looks could kill* ; biting down on a smirk the mind-mage politely ignored his guests' filthy glance before she turned away,

"You're paying."

"I didn't need mana to know that was coming. Very well, just let me sort a few things…"

Though they certainly weren't friends Jace was reasonably sure he knew the other planeswalker enough to sense something awry. Practitioners of the crimson arts were impulsive and reckless, much like their mana, but through their trip to this downtown bar Chandra had said nothing and, other than snarl, hadn't reacted to the one or two whistles she'd gotten on the way. She also hadn't objected to his minor glamouring, Jace now looking like an ordinary gateless due to a thin sheen of blue mana as he set a goblet in front of her,

"I got red, I hope you don't mind," Chandra shrugged, sniffed and knocked back a slug of the drink, ignoring his wince at her lamentable manners,

"It's drinkable; listen Beleren I've not got time. If you know what you're looking at tell me, if not I'll find someone else."

"I feel so valued, though it would help if I could see what I'm supposed to know about." He waited for her to produce something, a token, a treasure, a map like the one that had led to them crossing paths before but instead she merely closed her eyes and took a breath. Still he waited; only when she cleared her throat irritably did he realise she'd leant forwards slightly,

"I ah…"

"Hurry up; there wasn't anything I could take and you wouldn't believe me if I told you," the fire-mage snarled lowly, eyes down and building mental walls around what was important, "don't go where you're not wanted."

"Very well Nalaar,"; *this must be serious, she hates mind magic at the best of times* ; respectful of this Jace glanced around the bar and carefully wove a small impulsion in the minds of its patrons, making them look away as he stretched forth two fingers; her brow was warm under his touch, he could feel heat, the mana with her and…

… the celebrations were unexpected; last time she'd been here she'd nearly died but, that notwithstanding, she had unfinished business with Zendikar. On her guard as soon as she'd finished her 'walk the pyromancer conjured living fire about her, hearing distant bangs and screaming. She would have left well alone had she not recognised both the shouts as those of joy rather than fear and, more pressingly, a scute bug nearby, waving its tendrils. Incinerating it with a flicker she left quickly towards civilisation - there was no such thing as a single scute bug on Zendikar.

She'd 'walked into a forest, well away from any civilisation even if large cities never lasted long here, but in the few minutes it took her to find the noise source nothing tried to kill her. This only made her more paranoid so it was only by a combination of shock on her part and extreme luck on his the man who leapt upon her as she pushed into a clearing through a curtain of trees didn't end up a pile of ashes,

"My dear," he bellowed, half-deafening the planeswalker as he span her off her feet, "long into your travels are you; come, sit and celebrate. The Eye of Hope has opened; peace at last!" She didn't even get a chance to speak before the stranger, tattooed and reeking of ale, dropped her and staggered away, leaving her in his wake utterly shocked. Carefully touching the mana of the violent plane she was first surprised, and then amazed; Zendikar's power had always been erratic but this time the red mana flowed like water at her command. Summoning a few tiny birds of flame and dismissing them before anyone noticed the pyromancer decided something very strange must have been happened and set about finding answers.

It was a small caravan in the Oran Reef, what was left of it after the great fire but that blaze was nothing compared to the firestorm that had overtaken the whole plane in her absence. From what she could tell Zendikar, somehow, was at peace - there were far fewer of what the goblins called 'God's Practical Jokes', sweeping natural disasters that wiped out people without warning or mercy. Better than that, or worse depending on your viewpoint was the Roil, or rather the lack of it; it had simply ceased to exist one day, leaving all on the plane mystified until something had made them all look up. A new light had been born in the heavens, a new star above them that all had named the Eye of Hope, something that had calmed the vengeful fury of the fractious plane. All paid homage to it and she raised a mug towards the distant cold light as she took the caravans' offer of a bed for the night, though as she did she was thinking hard - she had never truly seen the Roil but respected Zendikars' fury and its history. Following the battle with the mad dragon-mage she had immediately left, her gut telling her to run, regroup and deal with the one who had set her on the trail of the scroll that had led her here before coming back, and now she had returned to this?

Something was wrong and that star had something to do with it; she had slept little, instead extending senses most didn't have through the space between planes. Nothing to do with the Blind Eternities was a science, more a matter of luck and feral instinct and this time both came through; she lay down upon hard carved wood and awoke upon warm grass, a strange sun overhead and wind fanning her flaming hair as she stood. A plane, one she had never travelled to before - the Roil must have blocked it out. Standing up and shading her eyes the firebrand saw nothing but rolling hills around her and mountains to the north so she headed north, seeking someone or something to tell her where she was.

It was a seeking that went unfinished; within an hour she was perturbed, within three she was coldly afraid and glad to be gone. Many people thought red mana users were brash, foolhardy and arrogant and all three were true but they also lived by their instincts a lot of the time, more so than any who weren't touch by green magic.

Three hours in this place, a simulacrum of a perfect world had her instincts screaming to get the hell away and she did, 'walking back to Zendikar so quickly she spewed up half her breakfast…

The dislocation made him wince but no more; he recovered so fast he raised a hand to her volcanic glower before she could speak,

"I saw; a new plane?"

"Not just a new plane, tell me what you saw there."

"I ah, I didn't really see much; I saw through your thoughts not your eyes, it's difficult to explain," he admitted, defusing her anger; *for now* ; "I sensed you were uncomfortable there though, why?"

"Why? Too long in that library's ruined your eyes Beleren; did you see anything in that plane, anything at all?"

"No I…"

"Exactly, nothing, that's what I wanted you to see! Gods damn it," she cursed at his nonplussed expression, "that plane, that whole place; I was there three hours or so and I didn't see anything. No people, no animals, not even a bloody fly - just the wind and the trees and the mana, mana I've not felt before."

"How so?"

"It was, it was," she fumbled for words, it was quite endearing to watch, "fresh, like it wanted to be used. I didn't have to tap into it, I just touched it and it came to me. I've never had that before no matter where I've been and that really got me concerned."

"I see; so," Jace took a sip of his wine before recounting the facts, "we have a formerly-violent plane at peace with a new star above it, the Roil is vanished and you've found a new plane nearby with mana but nothing else. What about those creatures on Zendikar?"

"Which ones?"

"The ones we… oh," belatedly he remembered she left just after he'd awoken, "never mind, you weren't there. I fail to see a problem; what do you need me for?"

"You need me to spell out the bloody obvious Jace? Mana is life right, so on this new plane where the hell is the life? It was a perfect world without any living thing on it that wasn't green, what the hell could do that?"

"Do; wait," a horrible suspicion bubbled up in his prodigious mind, "you think something affected it? How?" Chandra chuckled,

"If I knew that I wouldn't be here; even at my best I couldn't burn a whole bloody plane to cinders and even if I could the trees wouldn't pop right back up. I need to know what kind of magic could do that, remove all life from a plane, and who could wield it." Jace gave an unseen shiver; *I don't know if he can but I know one who'd like to have that power* ;

"I understand, and much as I wish you were I know you're not lying. Very well, drink up," he drained his goblet, Chandra quirking an eyebrow before following suit, "once I've picked up a few things from my lodgings we're going to Zendikar."

"Whoa," the pyromancer shot to her feet, eyes blazing, "this is mine Beleren; all I need from you is an idea or two. You don't get to muscle on in this."

"Muscle in on what, a plane with nothing on it - pardon my mirth but I prefer Ravnica. This is merely something to study and explore, no more no less; you can do whatever you like with your plane when I've made a few notes, move a whole cadre of pyromancers there and have them train for all I care."

"No chance, a spark there would send the whole place up. Wait," there was something approaching guile in her eyes as she squinted across the table, "my plane?"

"You discovered it, or is the phrase 'finders-keepers' not known to the red mages"; *I shouldn't tease her* ; really he of all people should know better than to irritate a woman able to charbroil him where he stood; *but it's so much fun* ;

"Watch your tongue before I rip it out; still, my own plane," Chandra put a delicate hand on her chin, expression rapt, "hmm, might have to call in a few favours but, yeah, I could get used to that…"

A few days later Jace heavily doubted his new partners' earlier convictions, though he didn't blame her for them. After stocking up on essentials or, to quote the fiery Ms Nalaar, 'packing up the library' the two had travelled to Zendikar quietly, spending a week or so there and marvelling at how peaceful the entire plane seemed. Jace had quickly sought out the sages of the gates of Halimar, placating Chandra's insistence to go to her plane now with promises that she'd learn more about the Roil there, though the introduction of the fire mage to the wizened archivists was an experience he'd gladly scrub from his mind later,

"So you people actually worshipped these, things?" Chandra said, turning a strange hunk of stone over in her hands as she sat with her feet on the table, examining its many facets,

"Worshipped, feared, lived in ignorance of," the merfolk clarified, swatting her boots as he walked past, "well, ignorant until they were reborn again."

"Reborn; you said they died out?"

"That is not dead which can eternal lie," the water-dweller said cryptically before brightening, "though it's strange. This has ever been a frightening world and those monsters were just another part of it, albeit the greatest threat save the Roil itself. We've chroniclers still scouring the lands but it seems likely they've fallen back into their torpor." Jace looked up sharply from the scroll he was poring over,

"The great ones have gone?"

"Aye, and taken the Roil with them; we call it the Calming. Overnight, or almost, the Roil vanished and everything settled; after a month of waiting for the sky to fall it seemed all was over. That was when people first saw it; the Eye of Hope - some say the Roil rolled right off the world and became a new star as we'd survived its trials long enough. You've heard of it?"

"Heard of it, heard its names sung in praises, it's not important," Chandra grunted, idly tossing the carved figurine back to its former place, "you don't know what's happened to the Roil?"

"We have ideas…"

"That's a no then," Chandra overrode him, standing and addressing Jace imperiously, "we've wasted too much time here already mind-mage."

"We've wasted nothing, but," he added just in time; racks of priceless ledgers and an angry pyromancer didn't mix well, "I see your point. My thanks for your time Halmig, we'll meet again."

Jace would stick to that promise; if nothing else he owed the merman after feeling somehow guilty for some of the peril Zendikar had found itself it, though he wasn't sure exactly why he felt that way. He was thinking of said peril when he opened his eyes to see Chandra grinning down at him,

"Well, we're here; welcome to Illustria."

"You just made that name up."

"It's my plane I'll name it what I like," she declared, "anyway, stop lazing around and feel the mana, though I didn't see any oceans for you to tap."

"That won't be necessary"; *I barely needed to think* ; a small orb of water was already in his hands, reflecting his pensive face, "you were right, the mana here is different."

"I was; sorry say that again, slowly," her grin was becoming insufferable, "I want to remember that, the great mind-mage Beleren said I was right!"

"And the great mind-mage can make you forget he ever said it as well Nalaar, remember that." The reaction was immediate, flame spreading up her arms as her hair rose menacingly,

"Just try it." He was sorely tempted to douse her with the water he'd gathered but through better of it, instead dropping it and watching it soak into the earth,

"Even a stopped watch is right twice a day," he muttered caustically, banking Chandra's ire with confusion, "now, let's see what I can find out…"

"Nothing!"

"Did I stutter; yes, nothing."

"But you said you were looking into the past," the pyromancer's fingers were drumming at her temples as though trying to hammer in what he was saying, "did you cast it wrong?"

"No," the was definite frost in his voice as he recovered his mana, though casting the spell had drained him less than the shock he'd had completing it, "I did not cast it wrong. This plane has always existed like this and it has been in existence for about… four months by the Ravnican calendar."

"That's a ten month cycle isn't it?"

"One per guild, yes"; the fire mage did some quick addition on her fingers,

"So half a year normally, but that's impossible…"

"Nalaar we travel between planes of existence in the blink of an eye; we of all people should use the word impossible with great care."

"Say that again."

"I don't want to fight…"

"No, no, say it again, about the planes," there was excitement rather than fire in her tone as her eyes crackled anew, "half a year ago I would have been… yes, yes it fits! Haven't you noticed 'walking's been easier recently?" Caught aback by the question Jace stumbled,

"Uh, no; I've not really left Ravnica much."

"Of course, entombed in the library chewing your books; alright pin your ears back. I've been travelling around a bit and it has been getting easier, I can't believe I didn't see it before. I can 'walk further, without risking death in the Blind Planes - I thought it was me getting stronger and until you I hadn't seen another planeswalker, so I still can't prove it since you've been sat on your arse half a year." Ignoring the slight Jace added this fact to his mental tally,

"It did seem easier to travel here, even with a guide, so what do we have now? Zendikar becalmed with a new star in its sky, planeswalking becoming easier in your experience and this newborn plane."

"So what does it mean?"

"Would you hit me if I said no idea?"

"I'd be tempted," she admitted before shaking her head, "there's got to be something we're not seeing. Do you know of anything that

could make a plane; what about," she straightened as though hit by lightning, voice dropping to a whisper, "the older ones, from before."

"No, the Mending altered every spark," Jace told her forcibly, half to convince himself the planeswalking demigods of the past were truly lost to history, "I've met the eldest of us and even he admits he's less now than he was. If he now couldn't create a plane I doubt anyone else could."

"But could he destroy one then remake it?"

"What?"

"Your spell says this is new and we agree; huh, first time for everything; that if there is something out there that can create a plane we've never met it, okay?"

"Yes…"

"So what else could alter history; burn down a tree, plant its seed and let it grow, you wouldn't see the same tree would you?" Jace pondered this for a moment,

"I've never tried but you could be right; yes, yes calm down you annoyance," Chandra merely smiled, her conjured fireworks now spelling out 'right again' over her head, "you think there was a plane here and someone or something, what, took it apart and then put it back?"

"Without the people, somehow; look I'm slinging fire in the dark here, that's why I came to you in the first place. Do you know any magic that could do it?"

"Very powerful temporal magic, maybe; that means time," he explained wearily at her confused look, "precise banishing magic, but that would leave an echo and shouldn't explain the lack of history of this place and possibly mana use of other colours. I don't know of

any great users of time any more, it's a difficult power to even understand let alone try to use."

"Back where we started," Chandra muttered, kicking a tuft of grass petulantly, "a place with nothing in it and no idea how it got this way or how none of us saw it before."

"Possibly the Roil, though none of this explains how the Calming came to Zendikar," Jace added another mystery to the pile making even his prodigious mind groan, "you've stumbled onto quite the conundrum here Nalaar; bring back the days when you were just a thief stealing scrolls I had to find."

"You had to bring that up didn't you? It all worked out in the end didn't it?"

"I find that rather rich coming from someone who'd have been dragon crap if not for me."

As the still of the young world was broken by a furious curse and the crackle of fire none noticed, none but the wind and those unseen behind the veil, who took flight back through what had been to inform someone of the interlopers.

And as the news came to his ears he paused for an instant, smiled, returned to his labours and slowly but surely drew up his plans to deal with them.

Home-plane sweet home-plane ; the sound, the smell, the touch of the mana was like nectar to the mind-mage as he opened his eyes upon the guild-city once more. Night had fallen, as much as there was night in the city that couldn't sleep, so he quick assumed his normal guise of a gateless citizen. Ignoring a casual brawl breaking out between a goblin dressed as a jester and an imp wielding a whip of lightning Jace stepped forwards, though his attempt to act normal was spoiled somewhat when a blast of fire sent the fighting goblin running away squealing and slightly singed,

"So much for trying to be a good neighbour," he muttered as Chandra blew on her fingertips, silently daring any nearby to make something of it before Jace seized her arm, "not now, we've work to do."

"Never any fun with you is there?"

"Not when it involves burning people, now come on; we shouldn't be too far from my home if I'm reading the street-signs right. Hopefully we won't have to cross the rubble-belt to get there."

"Why not, bit of hiking never killed anyone unless they've spent their life sat down reading books." Despite her teasing the pyromancer kept pace as Jace led the way, keeping him in sight as she knew getting lost in this city meant she'd likely never find her way out again,

"Pray you never go hiking in the rubble-belt; some of the beasts in there would make even the Gruul think twice before trying to tame them."

"Even dragons fear fire Beleren."

"And that means…?"

"Put enough effort in you'll get your reward," she explained, the saying one a few she remembered from her village, "so, if there's nothing for me in your stack of books I'll…"

It was then she realised she was talking to herself; Jace had stopped some half-dozen paces ago and, worse, had dropped his glamoured disguise. His pale face made the pyromancer back-track; *he helped me get this far after all* ;

"You look like you've see a vampire smile."

"Sense."

"Sense what?" Swallowing to regain some composure he faced Chandra squarely, voice calm but entire body tense,

"I've lived on Ravnica for most of my life that I can remember Nalaar, I know its guilds, its gates, some of its secrets and its mana. And I know," he looked up, scanning the sky and hating that his senses had been right, "that star wasn't in its sky when we left." The words struck dread into even a soul as fiery as Chandras', the fire mage following his finger to the new light above,

"But, we were only gone what, a month?"

"If that, you sense it though don't you?" She did, much as she wanted to deny it, "Another plane next to my own and no Roil to mask it. I have to go."

"No you damned well don't," it was her turn to grab his arm, "use that massive brain; when someone leaves a snare out you don't just walk into it, I thought you'd be bright enough to work that out."

"A snare?" He almost laughed, "Nalaar this plane has billions of sentient creatures living on it and from what we've gathered something might be altering the Multiverse itself. If it's like you say and planes are being broken and remade, if it happens here the guild wars will look like a Rakdos squabble - everything will die or be unmade. Can you walk away from that?"

"Did I say I was leaving? I never said we shouldn't go, I said we shouldn't go now - we've been walking and 'walking all day and we're both tired; if whatever this is decides it wants a fight we need to be fresh to stand a chance." Jace breathed harshly then, to her surprise, smiled wryly, regarding her anew,

"It's strange when the firebrand gives sage advice."

"No stranger than the bookworm taking up arms," she shot back before tugging him on, "come on, where's your place; I'm famished."

"It's definitely getting easier," the following morning after a night of sleep and meditation for Jace and 'battle-practise' involving lots of flaming spheres of death being put to creative uses for Chandra the two had met up close to his home, nodded and 'walked without saying a word,

"Quiet Nalaar," Jace said, eyes already glowing as he sensed through the murk around them, "if there's anything here I want to find it, not the other way around." She was tempted to shout just to spite him but strategy triumphed over petulance and she responded with a fierce whisper,

"Okay but you have to admit getting here didn't hurt as much as it usually does."

"I'll admit that, and the mana here," it rippled at his slightest touch, obey his whim rather than his spells, "it's the same, fresher even; this plane is younger than the other."

"How? This doesn't make sense, and it stinks," they were in the middle of a bog after all, the black mana around them oozing like tar, "can you clear the air or something?"

"For the guilds' sake don't light a spark," Jace warned her, stirring the air around them, "we'll be incinerated before either of us could get away."

"Fine, not like anything's here to get us or the midges would be eating me alive by now. It's the same as Illustria."

"But different," Jace corrected her, already scrying through the fog slowly, "before was a place of mostly harmony, this time black mana is in abundance. Whatever did this doesn't seem bound to one colour of mana as you or I are - this could be very bad," thinking it over the mind-mage was forced to draw a blank, "I would have sensed black mana this strong so close to Ravnica even in the midst of a Rakdos carnival. This is new, it must be, but how did it come to be so quickly while we were gone?"

"Maybe it was in a hurry?" Chandra offered, still looking around as they made for higher ground, "Can you sense anything alive; I don't want to use my mana here." Jace's eyes glowed ethereally, azure power trickling through the muck as he mastered the blue mana in this sickening place and, a moment later, shook his head,

"No but there's no telling how big this plane is; it could still be here."

"Well I'm not staying to find out, I'm sinking," Chandra shot back hotly, pulling first one, then the other foot free of the swamps' embrace, "unless you can sniff a way out of this mess I'm getting out of here."

"I'd have to agree; aha, this way," squelching away even if he wasn't getting wet due to a small warding spell the Ravnican called over his shoulder, "there's a lake over here."

"How's that any bloody good to me?"

"You can wash up before we return; I'd rather not have muddy boot prints on the carpet. No fire," he drawled as the pyromancers' fists clenched, "this swamps' new but I'd wager it's as volatile as you are. Dragons fear fire you said Nalaar, do you?"

"As soon as we're back in Ravnica…"

The rest of her threat went unspoken, Chandra pushing her now-sodden locks from her face as she arduously followed in Jaces' wake. Even as he led the two of them towards the small reservoir of blue mana his senses had discovered it was too late. None saw or felt the still wind whispering through the streets, ever-moving until it arrived at its final destination and paused enough to smile; the chickens had flown, and the fox was in their coop!

"Worst. Plane. *Ever!* "

"So you won't be claiming that one then?"

"Feh, no, it's too close to yours for a start," Chandra snorted, barging the mind-mage aside as she strode into his house, "how'd you afford this place anyway? You're hardly ever here."

"I was here a lot more before you came about," he riposted, letting himself in and grateful his attendants had all dispersed for the night, "and I'll be glad to be here again. You'll be at the same tavern I showed you last time?"

"Yeah, after I've borrowed your shower," any protest Jace may have had to this withered under her flaming gaze, "I am not using that inns' tin bath, it smells like a goblin went in there last."

"I didn't think goblins bathed."

"Not went in, *went* in; you're hopeless," she declared at his puzzlement; *brains none can fathom, not a lick of common sense* ; "where is it?"

"Second on the right upstairs, just turn the heat down when you're finished," he said absent-mindedly, thinking about what they had seen today and what he wanted to eat. He heard Chandra's muffled,

"No promises," as she left the main kitchen, the two of them having come in through the servants' entrance to avoid tracking in reeking, black mana-infused mud. *Another plane, another mystery* ; absent-mindedly picking down a few herbs and spices the Ravnican focused on the problem while hunting for a knife; *a mage or 'walker, obviously skilled in controlling black mana, staking out Ravnica somehow* ; memories even he couldn't erase teased the back of his mind and he shivered; *we were once far more than we are now. Is that true Bolas and, if it is* ; he shivered again, reaching for the sharp steel; *have you found a way to become more again… ;*

In hindsight it was fortunate he never started chopping; between his dire suspicions, the sudden gushing explosion and its accompanying shriek he'd probably have lost a finger. Knife clattering in his wake Jace pelted after his unwelcome guest and almost paid for that

haste, skidding in the water now flooding down the stairs. The thought it was going to cost him an arm and a leg to get the carpet re-laid was swiftly banished as he slewed to a halt and looked up, words and, thankfully, laughter catching in his throat. *Twin enchantments, mirrored on the staircase walls* ; his rational mind devoured the problem as the rest of it tried desperately not to react at the aftermath; *when she walked past they triggered and realised their contents. Water, and cold water that that* ; Chandra had been halfway up the stairs when the geysers had been unleashed, now she was panting hard and shivering harder as the shock doused even her fire. Jace should have said something, really it would have been less painful for all involved if he'd got the first word in but her bedraggled state was just too much; biting his lips until they threatened to bleed only just held his mirth in. She must have sensed him, steam beginning to wisp around her as she slowly turned around,

"Beleren!"

"Not…" he choked before trying again, "Nalaar I didn't do thi…" It was as far as he got before he felt a pulse of mana under his boot; there was the strangest rushing sensation all over him but before he could unleash even his hastiest counter-spell it was gone, leaving just a vague chafing. He glanced upwards only to be met by a gobsmacked expression, Chandra's eyes wider than her goggles as she pointed tremulously,

"You, it, it…" She managed, Jace shivering at the nip of the water around his ankles; *wait, why am I cold now?* He glanced down only to yell in shock as she burst out laughing, covering himself as best he could with his arms and desperately trying to undo the now-glowing trap that had stripped him of most of his clothes and all his dignity. Howling with mirth Chandra grasped the banister to steady herself but this proved to be a big mistake; with a sudden click all the stairs vanished into a slide, the water under her feet acting like grease as she flew down it with a despairing yelp. Preoccupied with

the trap Jace had no time to react before she hurtled into him, sending them both the floor with a splashing thump,

"Gaahhhaa, gods that's cold!"

"Getoffa me!"

"You're on me; ah-ahh, hands off, watch your gauntlet!"

"I need a grip."

"It's trapping my chest-hair!"

"It'll grow back…"

"Well isn't this cosy?" Both froze, orange staring into blue before they whipped their heads to the source of the unfamiliar voice. In their slanted vision they saw a small figure, dressed mostly in orange, regarding them from a high-seated chair with a book in one hand, a glass of something in the other and an air of amusement,

"Oh please," the interloper insisted, sipping his drink, "don't stop on my account." Chandra threw herself to her feet, not hearing her former cushions' agonised yelp as she ripped her armoured glove free, the steam boiling from her hair and body making her look like an enraged demon,

"Who the hell are you?"

"A guest of master Beleren, unofficially; excellent cellar by the way, though unlike you pair your reading material's a little dry. Finally with us again?"

"Finally," Jace agreed, having unravelled the trap as he'd retaken his feet and grateful to be back in his clothes as mana flared beneath his hood, "what are you doing sitting in my chair, drinking my wine and reading my book?"

"I'm sitting on your chair, drinking your wine and reading your book, and until very recently I was watching two planeswalkers pratfall into my traps then start floor-wrestling."

"So," Jace was never more dangerous than when he was calm, something Chandra no longer was as her hair rose into an inferno, "these traps were your doing?"

"Duh," the child, for even perched on the edge of the seat his feet barely touched the floor, grinned, "always been a prankster at heart; it's not my fault your security sucks."

In the face of a ball of white-hot destruction, unseen by his opponents, he smiled at the déjà-vu; once he had been forced to learn a harsh lesson, now it was his turn to be the teacher; *and I only hope you pick up the lesson better than any of us did! Kakashi-sensei, this one's for you…* ;

As the fire died away Jace sighed,

"That was my favourite chair and that book was one of only two copies left on this plane."

"You've memorised it already," Chandra said dismissively, "and it was worth it to be rid of that nuisance."

"True but I'd have liked to speak to him first; he got thought my sensory wards, I'd have liked to know how." She snickered, pointing the gently flickering fires before them,

"Well unless you know a good necromancer it's not happening," luckily he managed to hide the pang of pain before she turned to him, "you clean up this mess, I'm going for a show…"

She vanished so quickly he thought she'd planeswalked away; only a tirade of vehement swearing near his ankles made him to look down and see Chandra glaring up at him, struggling to break free of

the floor as water lapped her chin. Blue mana flaring up around him the mind-mage extended his senses throughout the room as he jumped backwards from the disembodied head. Nothing was hidden from his sight beyond sight, the blue mana infiltrating every nook and cranny of his home to forewarn him any attack so when he bumped into something directly behind him and heard the warning,

"Look before you leap," he got a nasty shock that only got nastier as the stranger quickly span him to the floor, mashing his face into the sodden carpet with one foot and twisting his arm into a painful lock; *damn, he's well trained* ;

"How'd you do that?"

"I don't think you're in any position to ask questions," from the corner of his eye Jace realised it was the child Chandra had just incinerated; *unless that was an illusion of some kind* ; "and considering you just tried to barbecue me I'd watch it."

"After you bloody half-drowned me," Chandra spat back, trying to melt her way free of the stone prison as he waved his free hand dismissively,

"Details, and the way you pair have been stalking me recently I don't think there's a jury who'd convict me even in this city. Actually that's why I came here," the firebrand scowled but stilled as the child suddenly twisted Jaces' arm, making him snarl in pain, "why have you been following me?"

"I don't even know who the hell you are!"

"I don't believe you," those were not the eyes of a boy; they were cold as the water submerging half Jaces' face, "and I have ways of making you talk."

Pinned as he was there was little Jace could do; whoever this saboteur was he either knew of the mind mages' abilities or was exceptionally lucky. The gloves he was wearing stopped skin

contact, hampering Jaces' touch until he could gather enough power to push through the material to the mind behind. Unable to break the surprisingly strong grip Beleren was forced to watch helplessly as the trapped pyromancer stiffened, eyes widening as she looked down as much as she was able to,

"What are you doing? Hey, hey let go, leave that alone!"

"Don't touch her," Jace shouted, glaring as much as he could from one eye and struggling to gather mana, "we don't know you!"

"Stop it, I'm sorry I tried to burn you; what are yoohhuuurk!" Her face went white, then purple, the crimson mage thrashing madly at an unseen torment, gritting her teeth hard,

"Chandra," they weren't friends but Jace had seen too many acquaintances harmed while he was powerless, he refused to let it happen again, "stop this, please!"

"Too late Beleren," the child's voice was sing-song, he seemed to revel in misery and pain, surely a scion of the Lord of Riots, "you brought this on yourselves when you meddled in my business, and now," his smirk was sinful as he looked forwards, "payback."

"Chandra!"

"PPfffftttehehehehehehe - stoppit!" Jace's jaw dropped, only his incredible mental control preventing his accumulated mana slipping away as she crumbled, "No fahahahahair, lemme go; not funny!"

"You seem to be laughing."

"I'll kill yohohohouuu! There won't even be cinders le-aaah! No-no-nohohohohoho!"

"Now that's the kind of talk that got you into thi… oh." What her torturer had meant to say was lost as the room flooded azure; power

flickering from every pore Jace forced the breach, a spear of icy mana extending from his hand straight between the boy's eyes.

Thank the gods ; as the boy was impaled by the powerful blue cantrip Chandra caught her breath, finally able to concentrate enough to start loosening the prison around her; *saved by bloody Jace Beleren though, again - I'll never live this down* ;

"Ah, that could be a problem," fear choked her fire, the blue lance had guttered out and Jace wasn't moving, limp and lifeless as the devil-child dropped his arm,

"What have you done to him?"

"He did it to himself, poking his mind in where it's not wanted. Don't worry, nothing I can't fix; keep quiet a minute." Forcing herself upwards, uncaring as hot stone scraped her bare skin the pyromancer pushed herself free to her waist just as their attacker did a strange thing; with a single motion he pushed his hand somehow through the air, a shimmering split opening that he peered into,

"Hmm, can't be far… aha, gotcha!" As she pulled herself fully loose Chandra forced herself calm; though she'd love nothing more than to reduce this demon to blackened bones she couldn't do it yet, not when he had one arm pushed through the scrying portal he'd created and Jace at his mercy, "come here ya slippery… Oi, no; drop the planeswalker," the boy suddenly became stern, talking as though to a disobedient puppy, "drop him… drop! Good," with a blur the portal was closed and Chandra blinked hard; there was another Jace, pale blue and ethereal, dangling by his ankle from the boy's right hand as motionless as the flesh and blood one,

"Hmm, wrong end," he tossed the ghost into the air, catching it again by the collar on the way down and bringing his free hand up, "if-you-let-your-mind-wander-off-again-I-won't-bring-it-back-next-time!" Each word arrived with a slap to the Ravnican's phantom face and despite herself Chandra snickered; she'd wanted to do that for a long time. Ending his tirade the house-breaker suddenly stooped, slamming the

ghost back into the torpid body and Jace convulsed, gasping as Chandra rushed to his side, the boy stepping away from them both,

"Jace, Jace talk to me!"

"The river…"

"River? What river?"

"The river, it flows backwards," he babbled, eyes wide and unfocussed, "back to the beginning where string's only as long as you cut it. I walked into Mordor, I know why there's no spoon and I found the droids I was looking for; *Cthulu fhtagn*, buggrit, millennium hand and shri…"

There were many types of magic that could heal a broken mind; the soothing waters of the islands could wash away trauma, the invigorating life of the forests could regrow the damage or the lancing strength of the plains would sear away the pain like light banishing darkness,

"Snap out of it!" Unfortunately the closest thing Jace had to first aid adhered to a different school of medicine; on the one hand it was effective, on the other it left a huge red mark on one cheek and his eyeballs spinning in different directions,

"Ooowwww," he moaned, trying to will the agony away, "what happened?"

"You went where you weren't wanted," the voice made him roll over and try to conjure a few scraps of mana in paltry defence, "don't try, it won't work. Listen, just for a change let's all act like adults; get yourselves sorted out and we'll all sit down and talk like rational people, and Kami that's weird coming from me." The two planeswalkers shared a look before silently agreeing, neither of them was in a fit state to duel and whoever this person was if he wanted them dead he'd had chance to do it. Chandra pulled her reluctant partner to his feet, Jace leaning on the wall as Ravnica span, trying

to logically order his traumatised mind as he recanted basic mental exercises with his eyes closed, listening to the ongoing conversation,

"Hey, how'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"This place should still be smoking, how'd you fix the damage?"

"Was there ever any damage; I'm a prankster not an arsonist, that's your field. What I actually did is a long and boring story, the short version is I absorbed your fireball and cast a minor genjutsu on both of you making you think it had sent me to a lamentably early grave, giving me the chance to set up the trap that had you spilling your guts."

"Watch it," Jace smiled; despite all that had happened and might still happen yet seeing the pyromaster humbled almost made up for it, "I still owe you for that, and what's a gen-jutsu?"

"Illusion, of sorts - you with us now?" Opening his eyes and grateful nothing appeared to be moving Jace turned and nodded,

"I believe so."

"Good, you better get more seats; I'm sure you've got questions."

Considering their introduction it was surprisingly civilised, the boy even let Jace have his favourite chair back, saying he preferred to stand and Chandra, one shoe still missing, was content with a footstool, at eye-level with the child even seated; *such a runt, how did he beat the two of us?* ;

"Before we get started on why I'm here, introductions; my name is Naruto," the boy said, looking between the two of them as they swapped a glance and, in Jace's case, slightly more,

" *Kamigawa maybe?* "

"You…" she just caught she'd spoken aloud in time to swerve the question to Naruto, keeping the mind-mages' telepathy secret, ."..'re definitely human? I've met a few shape shifters in my time."

"Uh, kind of," Naruto made a waving motion with his hand, shrugging apologetically as she quirked an eyebrow, "unfortunately that's going to be a running theme with my answers here, it's complicated."

"Oh dear, Nalaar is doomed," Jace cut in only to be cut down in turn,

"I'm sorry whose dirty laundry did my trap just air? Be grateful I left you your underpants and her name's Chandra."

"I know her name," he also mentally cursed it as he saw her shaking shoulders from the corner of his eye, "and now I know yours. What I don't know is why you're in my house and why you attacked us."

"Like I said your security sucks and don't look too smug Chandra-san; you walked straight past me earlier and I'm wearing bright orange."

"Thought you were a fire," she mumbled before going back on the front foot, "still, what he said, why are you here and who sent you?"

"Not who exactly, what and I'm here because I wanted to meet the two of you; I thought I'd have a little longer before anyone found me but you caught on a lot faster than I'd intended."

" *Do you have any idea what he's talking about?* " Not trusting soundless speech Chandra shook her head minutely before asking,

"Found you where; I said I don't know you and I was telling the truth, I've never seen you before."

"No? Just off Zendikar, ring any bells?"

"Illustria!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Illustria; my, or that plane; how do you know about it?"

"Illustria," he said again, rolling the world around in his mouth like a sweet, "that's a nice name. Still, I will answer but," his raised hand forestalled further questions, "before I do I must tell you a story, a long one, and I'd rather do that while we 'walk."

"So you are a planeswalker like we are?" Fishing, Jace was interested to see the boy smile at his query, though the answer only deepened his intrigue,

"Yes and no; I am a planeswalker of sorts but not like yourself or your good lady there," the Ravnican cringed, not daring to look at how well Chandra had taken that insinuation; *though I can't smell anything burning - yet* ; "anyway time's getting on and I don't like running late - had enough of that before in the past," a faint flicker rippled across his eyes but was gone before either Jace or Chandra could decipher it. Stepping away from the wall Naruto turned his back to them and moved, then both the other planeswalkers were scrambling back aghast at the swirling nexus that had engulfed the far wall,

"What is it?"

"I'm not going in there, I've seen what it did to him and it wasn't pretty!"

"Neither are you; it's a perfect match," Naruto riposted sardonically, Chandra gaping at his cheek before he went on, "you will be perfectly safe, you 'walk here all the time." Jace grasped the significance was what he was seeing slightly the faster,

"That's the Blind Eternities - impossible…"

"It is and it is not; now would you mind stepping through, time is precious after all."

"Just a minute," Chandra demanded, limping towards the foot of the stairs, looking at the carpet like it had insulted her, "alright, spit it out!" Seeing her plan Jace likewise excused himself, his cantrip for sponging up the spilt water masking his other mana use as the floor shifted, heaved and belched up the pyromancers' boot,

" *Do we trust him?* "

" *No bloody chance*," he suppressed a wince; Chandra had no inside-voice, " *we go with him though, I don't think he'll take no for an answer and he's already beaten us once* ."

" *With surprise and trickery* ."

" *And that's supposed to be your forte*," she clipped her footwear back on, triumph in her eyes and crowing in her mental voice, " *he made you look an amateur Beleren, you're slipping* ."

" *Like you did down my stairs and into his clutches*," he retaliated, a sardonic smirk gracing his lips as he sublimed the water into the air, " *ticklish?* " Her glare was venom incarnate but more worrying was the smile a second later, almost sickening in its sweetness,

" *Absent-minded?* "; *ouch* ; Jace cut off the mental connection and faced the stranger in his home again, subtly gathering mana should he needed it,

"Sorry for the wait Naruto, we are ready." He didn't turn around,

"Good, step through when I do," not a second later the three were gone, the only hint they had ever been the faint whisper that echoed before it too was lost,

'"Walk with me."

The Blind Eternities were so called because precious few who could traverse them ever did with their eyes open and none ever did so

twice. The space between planes was turbulent and traumatic, several 'walkers had died in their cloying embrace; the first and most fundamental rule every planeswalker learnt upon ascension was that 'walking should be done quickly, over short distances and as little as possible.

As Jace had already begun to suspect however, the normal rules didn't seem to apply to Naruto.

They had stepped through the portal into serenity; the Eternities were chaos no longer but rather a white mist, held back by an invisible bubble Naruto seemed to control, though how he did so the mind-mage had no idea. Within this sphere all was calm, the tumult held at bay until Chandra got bored with the view,

"I thought there'd be a bit more happening."

"Why so?"

"Don't be an idiot Jace, you know how painful it is to 'walk," she snapped, "all that cold and buffeting, it should be like a rock-slide or a huge crowd, not this mist."

"Unless there's something hiding in it," he countered, turning his attention to the back of a head of a blonde hair, "is there, just out of interest?"

"No, in here what you see is what you get; whether you can understand what you see is a different question," Naruto said without turning around, though before either planewalker could do more than share a puzzled glance he went on, "anyway, I promised you a story and the meat of what's going on so let's get into it, though, unlike most stories this one starts at an end."

"An end - what, you're telling it backwards?"

"No, literally it began with an end, the end actually," the short figure went on, guiding their bubble through the mist with tiny waves of his

hands, eyes firmly forwards, "the end of everything that had been. Don't ask me what it was or what caused it, all I know is that when the end ended nothing was as it had been before the end." Chandra groaned,

"My head hurts already," she complained, massaging her temples, "the end of the end happened?"

"Good, you're keeping up," Naruto said encouragingly before going on, "and the main change of the end was that something, or actually a lot of somethings had been violently dislocated; they had been in one place, now they were in another. And I'm not talking just a few somethings either, I'm talking huge, beyond counting amounts, all crushed and mashed and mangled together far from home and reduced to the most basic form now in the Multiverse."

"Mana," Jace answered the unspoken question, "someone created a large reserve of it?"

"That's one way of putting it, but here's the strange thing; he, she, it or whatever event it was that heralded the end created too much of it, far too much. Tell me Jace-san, what happens when you have a critical mass, too much of something?"

"It burns, if it's mana," Chandra interrupted, recalling a few past mishaps with a wince, "try and hold too much it'll break free and you don't want to be anywhere near it when it does." Unseen, the youngest planeswalker smirked; *you don't know how right you are, on both counts* ;

"It does but that's not quite what I was looking for - think of insects, or even people; what happens if their colony grows so large they dominate their environment, use up all their resources, what do they do?"

"They adapt," the answer was obvious, too obvious; *though maybe that's me being paranoid, for good reason* ; "they move on, evolve or cannibalise themselves."

"They do and our unfortunate font of mana, or at least mostly mana, there were other bits thrown in there as well when the end came, found itself in the same boat, trapped and away from its origins. Over time though, the inevitable came to be; the mana evolved."

"Into what?" Chandra's curiosity burned like her fire did,

"Into nothing; it evolved a mind, no, apologies, mind would be too grand a word for it; perhaps consciousness would be better. Yes, that will do, a consciousness slowly came into being amid this sea of mana, a very vague intelligence bent on one task; to undo the end and return to where it had come from."

"Mana that can think? How can that work?"

"And where is it; I mean," Chandra explained as both glanced at her, "mana's bound to things and planes, we summon it to use spells. A huge amount of unbound mana, someone would have sensed it."

"Indeed," Jace surprisingly backed up the red mage, facing Naruto's back as he guided their bubble of calm, "I sensed a plane of black mana close to Ravnica. If the amount of mana, or mostly mana, you're describing is free, where did it go to remain hidden?"

"It's not hidden, it never was; we're standing in it."

"What?" Chandra's voice was flat, Jace at her side already glancing into the mist as though expecting them to swarm forth in a devouring tide,

"The Blind Eternities were created by the end," Naruto said, as though re-writing the history of the Multiverse was little different from commenting on the weather, "it had always been of course, the space between, but the end engorged it. It grew far, far too large and nothing was as it had been before; time has little meaning here but even so the first conscious understandings took eons to form and eons longer to coalesce, be given purpose and then bend to their task."

"Their task was to undo the end?" Jace said carefully, not taking his eyes from the back of Naruto's head, "But wouldn't that have destroyed these… thoughts?"

"Restored, not destroyed; it's very complicated but regardless the Blind Eternities eventually came to a decision about what to do to get things back to how they used to be. However in the time it had taken to reach those decisions other effects of the end had become apparent already, much to the dismay of your predecessors I'm sure."

"Predecessors? Other planeswalkers you mean?"

"Older ones yes, those who wandered lost and were claimed by the mists," the childs' voice was solemn at Chandras' question, "all the Eternities remembers what was and all would see existence restored to how it used to be. In those who bore sparks they saw those who could help them but," he shook his head, "mortals can't persist here. This place is anathema to even the most powerful planeswalkers and many were lost, drowned in the need of the Blind Eternities." Chandra snapped her fingers,

"So that's why 'walking's so hard; this place is haunted," she declared, "the, what, the ghosts tried to keep us here until we died?"

"Not out of malice I assure you, and there are no ghosts exactly Chandra-san; imagine the Eternities is a single organism, one gigantic being we are moving through. The longer you're within it the more likely it is to sense you, recognise you and react; sometimes it takes a long time, others not so much; it's mostly down to luck and, loathe as I am to say it, fate in a sense."

"Ick, digested by a big ghosts' belly," the pyromaster grimaced, "give me death by fire any day."

"With pleasure, I'll get a match."

"You'd only try once," Chandra's glower met Jaces' amusement, neither budging an inch until the third member of their party cleared his throat,

"Play nicely children," both rounded on him before looking away, though they paid attention as he continued his story, "so, the Blind Eternities was created and the first planeswalkers were granted their abilities to traverse it while it dreamed. But none can dream forever; for a long time the merest and most basic thoughts collided within this sea of mist, lesser ideas falling and being cannibalised by their betters until at last the greatest stood alone, willed into being the majority of the Eternities itself. Each was a pinnacle, the true idea if you will, of how this disparate mass would undo the end and restore what was lost; in the beginning there were four."

"Four?"

"Four," Naruto confirmed, "as I'm sure Jace-san would agree, sometimes there's too much on your mind for just one idea to solve a problem. So they began their task with their own methods and all, it must be said, with a distinct lack of success. Not entirely their fault, they were effectively ideas from a very simple mind, unfashioned, crude and driven by a single purpose, but given their coming preceded calamity, devastation on a scale unseen in the Multiverse until they were curtailed, and it's for the best they were. The methods they used were too crude and destructive; it would have been the Multiverses' ruin for them to go unchecked. However the rest of the Blind Eternities became aware of the fours' absence, though the fourth was lost to avarice rather than fear, and realised none of them had shown the desired result."

"Back to the drawing board then?"

"Exactly"; *I'm beginning to hate that spell* ; for the third time in quick succession Jace was forced to endure the small firecrackers and gloating words of his companions' success before Naruto's voice hushed them, "the Eternities had evolved even over this time, better able to think and rationalise and with these better instincts realised a

different approach, far more subtle than the first four, was created, a scalpel rather than a hammer. So a fifth idea was spawned and tore its way from the hidden into the real Multiverse, this time with a much different method to its brothers. Weaker than them all by far it arrived on a nameless plane as a simple seed." Jace didn't need telepathy to realised Chandra was as disbelieving as he was,

"A seed; it was planted there?"

"Yes; well it planted and artificially grew itself but in the end there was a giant tree in the middle of my world so close enough," Naruto explained, recalling what the being who had once been part of that great idea had told him within the mists, "the tree bound itself to the mana of the plane and grew within it. By doing this it became something more than just an idea; it became a tangible thing, something that interacted in and with the world around it and, like all children, by doing this it learned."

"That makes sense," Jace agreed, though his eyes never dropped from the back of his guides' head, "and you discovered this… idea?" Naruto chuckled,

"No, it was a legend long before my grandparents were a sparkle in their parents' eyes. It was called the Shinju and the legends said one who could ascend it would become a god, hence its other name of the God-tree. The plane it was on, however, was a fractious place, its people warlike and dangerous, and all human oddly enough. There was war for a long time before someone seeking peace did the impossible and climbed the Shinju, claiming the legendary treasure atop it, the power of a god."

"But," Chandra thought for a second, "if the tree was an idea from this place how could it… wait, did it give her a spark?"

"Would that it could, it would have made everything a lot easier but it had learnt from earlier mistakes. No, what it had done over its long lifetime rooted into the ground was merge itself, the need of the Blind Eternities, with the planar mana. This blending of idea and reality

would, in theory, allow the one who accepted it to both know and have the power to begin undoing the end of everything, theory being the operative word."

"What's a theory?"

"A scientific guess that can be tested by experimentation, the Izzet are famed for them," Jace supplied before a devil made him add, "for example, I have a theory one out of us three is somewhat lost by this conversation."

"Oh yeah," the pyromaster cracked her knuckles, "well I have a theory that I'll make you swallow that theory along with your teeth if you carry on!"

"That would be a certainty Nalaar, not a theory," only his supreme poker-face kept Chandra from swinging, neither of them able to see their host smirk slightly as he took their situation and related it to another he was familiar with; *hmm, can't see either of them in green spandex though - well, maybe Chandra-san… dammit Ero-sennin, your corruption lingers!* ; "though, I imagine this Shinju's theory didn't end so well."

"As you'd expect, not first time; I don't know the full story but what I do know is its treasure was actually a fruit and it did what it said on the tin. The one who ate it gained powers akin to a god and was able to quell all the fighting on the plane, becoming worshipped as the Rabbit Goddess - however it wasn't quite right, and the Shinju knew it, for two reasons. First the power it had was still stuck on the plane but also its power was too much for a single being to fully comprehend and control. Its first host went somewhat mad, becoming a despot and refusing to give back the power she'd taken; when this happened it took matters into its own hands, er tentacles." Chandra shuddered,

"Sounds like something a black mage would have."

"Having never met one I wouldn't know," Naruto admitted, not entirely truthfully, "but anyway the Shinju awoke after realising its power was being abused; however by this time the one who'd eaten its fruit, a princess called Kaguya, had had two children who inherited her powers and, realising she was going slightly nuts, had taken her down to save the plane. After that, driven by visions and thoughts they could not truly comprehend as they weren't bound to the tree as their mother had been, they went around unlocking within others the power their mother had granted to them."

"Mana," Jace said unexpectedly, deducing the answer from the evidence he thus far had, "the Blind Eternities are a reservoir of it and the Shinju was part of them, so it stands to reason that was their power."

"And it was; my world was changed by the one they called the Sage of Six Paths, one of Kaguya's sons who created ninshuu, abilities unlocked with spiritual energy, mana, blended with physical energy to create the jutsu ninja on my plane use."

" *Kamigawa then?* "

" *Never been but heard rumours, though they're just normal skilled thieves aren't they?* " Without waiting for an answer Chandra pressed on,

"So your sage, he taught all humans on your world spells, of a sort?"

"Definitely of a sort, though like everything we've evolved them since he died. Anyway, this is the important bit; the Shinju tree set out to retrieve its lost power while the Sage was still alive and, thinking it was a monster, he set out to take it on. In the end he couldn't beat it so did something different; he sealed the Shinju's spirit within himself, binding the mana of the idea while leaving its physical shell more or less untouched and that, right there, was when he figured this whole mess out. He came face to face with a, well he considered it a god, and the two were able to communicate…"

"How come he didn't go as mad as his mother?" Idly wondering how much of a pain in the ass his interruptions must have been to his teachers, Naruto explained the pyromancers' interruption calmly,

"He'd already been exposed to the Shinju's power from his mothers' blood and likely had an inkling of its true nature; I can't prove it of course but that's what makes sense to me. Face to face with it in his own mind was likely a different bag of kunai but, from that, a real way forwards was finally seen; the Shinju was still just an idea, one more subtle than anything the Blind Eternities had coalesced yet it was still very crude and completely alien to virtually anything outside there. The Sage, however, was a man and as a man he could hone the Shinju, whittle the God-tree into what it needed to be. Because of that he travelled the plane, learning all there was to know until, on his death-bed, he split the Shinju into nine equal pieces and hid its physical shell on our moon. While mobile the Shinju had taken the form of a great beast with ten tails; what the Sage created were the bijuu, the tailed beasts, each one a fragment of the idea merged with mortal sentience."

"Smaller pieces, and each granted, understanding?"

"Emotion," Naruto corrected Jaces' hypothesis, "the sage gave these children of the Shinju the power to communicate with mortals, albeit at a rather crude level. Together with the power of his ninshuu he had discovered the ultimate way of seeing the Shinju's idea realised; the humans he'd allowed to use mana would evolve his teachings into many things, primarily war, but regardless one of the main offshoots was what we called fuuinjutsu, the sealing arts. These were methods by which the bijuu could be sealed, though of course they didn't make it easy for those who wanted to restrain them." *That doesn't make sense* ;

"How would that help?" Chandra queried, honestly confused rather than frustrated, "If they were sealed how could they teach people about this idea they were part of?"

"Because of what they were sealed into; remember Chandra-san despite being just parts of the Shinju these nine bijuu were still massively powerful beings of pure mana, immortal and indestructible. To cage them, especially the ones with more tails, required they be sealed into beings that could already use mana - anything else would likely shatter from their power."

"They sealed the bijuu into people?"

"Children Jace-san; don't look so shocked, I've seen what your guilds consider initiation rites," that quickly knocked the horrified look off the Ravnican's face, "this created jinchuuriki, powers of human sacrifice and did three things. First and most important it meant the bijuu couldn't rampage across the land unopposed as some of them liked to, second it meant the village that did so had a living chakra; that's what we call mana where I'm from; battery in their ninja ranks and, unknown to everyone else, gave a chance that the dream of the Eternities might be finally realised."

"Are you going to make me ask?" Naruto sighed,

"You have no appreciation of the fine art of dramatic pausing," he said reproachfully, Chandra not looking at all guilty as he went on, "the idea was that the Eternities alone couldn't undo the damage, so they'd need help from beyond the veil. They needed a mortal to work through, they needed a planeswalker."

"But staying here would ki… wait," Jace's own thoughts were disturbed as he saw Chandra take a step back, face paling as one trembling finger pointed at his back, ."..you?"

"Yes, I was a jinchuuriki," Naruto confirmed, at last glancing over his shoulder with a slightly sad but whimsical smile, "and when my spark ignited it merged with the bijuu I contained, ripped off the emotions the Sage had given it and made it remember what it truly was. I was dragged into the Eternities and learned of what had happened and my role in undoing it. Because of that I've got one foot in here, one foot out there and I'm working on putting to rights whatever started

this whole ball rolling and made the Eternities as we know them." Jace and Chandra glanced at each other and this time didn't need telepathy to tell what the other was thinking,

"So," the pyromancer said carefully a few seconds later, trying to sound casual, "what, ah, what do you have to do?"

"Not much, a few alterations here and there, add a bit, take a bit and eventually end the Multiverse; ah, speaking of which, we're here."

Just as the veil of reality parted and they were propelled through, the two planeswalkers' last sights were of each others' paling faces as the message behind his words coldly and horribly sank in.

The blackness was so complete Jace only realised he wasn't dead when he blinked; orientating himself by the searing orange of his guides' attire, he wetted his lips enough to speak while trying to conjure a few scarps of mana,

"Uh, forgive me Naruto… what?" The insistent pawing at his arm made him break off only to see his companion transfixed; following her eyes he looked past the diminutive planeswalker in front of him and was likewise enraptured. Not everything was black, he'd just been looking between his feet; before Naruto, who still had his back to them, was the most dazzling, dizzying and beautiful thing he had ever seen through his or anyone elses' eyes.

Across a canvas of midnight was drawn a sky of purple, blue and golden yellow, the streamers and strands of colour twisting and plaiting together as though alive. Here and there, suspended like raindrops, shone tiny jewels so white it hurt to look at them, the whole thing rendered both majestic and eerie by the absence of all else. There was no noise to accompany this ethereal beauty, no way to reach out and touch it; only with the eyes could one glut themselves on such unearthly magnificence. Swallowing hard and blinking to stop his vision breaking, Jace mastered himself enough to ask,

"What is it?"

"A big cloud of dust, gas and radiation drawn together by gravity and a little help from me," Naruto said clinically, heeding a tiny explosion in the back of his mind and counting down, "it's called a nebula."

"Nebula," Chandra parroted the word entranced, not taking her eyes from the stunning cosmic parade, "it's beautiful; you made this?"

"Thank you and kind of; I provided the raw materials and the rest, well," Naruto swept a hand out towards the past, "it kind of goes from there once you've kick-started it. It's a cradle, no, actually birthplace fits better - well, it was." The woman glanced at him askew,

"Was?"

"Yeah, technically what you're looking at no longer exists. Forgive me a second of grandeur, I love this bit," he brought forth one hand, the fingers on it primed and ready,

"And there was," he snapped them, " *light!* "

There was, so bright and all-encompassing the only reason none of them went immediately blind was because Naruto had strengthened the shield around them all, blocking out all but the merest fraction of the light and all of the more harmful emissions from the new globe of fire his clones had helped birth. *Still, that was the easy bit, now after they put the rocks together I get the hard part* ;

"Turn it down," someone behind him shouted and, eager to oblige and feeling mischievous, he did the next best thing,

"Sorry, should have warned you."

"You should," Jace agreed, grateful for the sudden shade, "still, all is forgiven if you wo…"

The rest of his words withered to nothing as he looked ahead and saw exactly what had blocked out the light, a fiery oath to the side of

him letting him know Chandra had done the same. Hurtling towards them was darkness incarnate, a chunk of earth so massive it dwarfed them all and was still expanding; lost in its shadow he reached hastily for his stored mana; *no chance of a shield it's, it's titanic! I have to incorporeate but, if I do…* ; he wasn't sure why he glanced at the others but in doing so and blocking out Chandra's frantic swearing, he just noticed Naruto raise one arm and intone two words in a language he'd never heard before. Something huge and invisible rippled from his outstretched hand and raced towards their onrushing doom; force met force and all was still, the gargantuan stone now spinning gently, no longer threatening to splatter them. The mind-mage caught his breath just in time to see other such monoliths, twins and greater than the one Naruto had stopped, whizzing overhead and all around them, their sheer scale driving even his prodigious talent to vulgarity,

"What the hell is going on?"

"What have you done you lunatic?!"

"First I can't be a lunatic, there's no moon yet and second this is what you wanted to know, both of you," finally the shortest present looked over his shoulder and both his guests recoiled; the eyes that regarded them weren't those of a child, they weren't even *human*, "Chandra Nalaar, Jace Beleren," ripples that had once been pupils span, his grin stretching beyond sanity as the two planeswalkers readied themselves, "this is where the magic happens!"

He looked forwards and they realised they were moving only when the rock that had threatened oblivion was behind them, Naruto whipping a hand behind him and whispering the two words again to send it flying on its way. There was no wind, no noise, nothing for them to judge how fast the mad planeswalker was pulling them towards the globe of fire somewhere in the distance,

"Jace," he looked across at the shout, unable to really move as he was suspended by the strange magic, "still alive?"

"I think so, unless we're both already dead."

"Don't even joke," the red mage demanded, trying a few sculling strokes before a lick of flame whipped from her far hand, propelling her as he reached out. Her skin was warm in his palm and he gripped tight, seeing his fear echoed in her face,

"Stick close," she breathed and Jace almost laughed; what could either of them do? Naruto had bested them both on Ravnica with trickery, in the Blind Eternities with mystery and now, wherever this was, with inhuman power and magic beyond anything he'd seen. *But she's right* ; he would swallow his gall and admit that now, Chandra gripping his shoulder as he had her forearm, both of them equally wondering, fearing and doubting what Naruto's plans truly were and what part he would have them play.

The space around them was empty and vast, there was no up or down as they were dragged along in Naruto's slipstream. *If he lets us go we'll float here forever, at least until we die of thirst* ; the thought was only marginally less comforting than doing nothing until the madman leading them finally acted but, the lesser of two evils, Jace bit his tongue and looked down and away from the burning light ahead until Chandra bellowed in his ear,

"Look, ahead," wincing as his hearing rang the Ravnican did, seeing the small patch of blackness ahead, "another rock?"

"Yes, but it's not moving," it was also oddly shaped compared the irregular lump Naruto had stopped earlier; from what he could see as it bit into the outline of the distant fireball, this one was roughly spherical, "I'm almost sure that's where we're going."

"You genius," somehow he was grateful that, even as the Multiverse fell to pieces, he could count on the red mages' sarcasm, "can you tell what it is?"

"Not from here; stay alert and try to sense a way out of here," his spark hadn't latched on to any plane within 'walking distance but she

might have better luck, "we have to run if we get the chance, I've no mana for a fight."

"I've no mana for anything; this place is a void," the spitfire agreed, eyes glued forwards as the orb before them swelled in their vision, "how big is this gods-damned thing?"

"Huge," given a minute and a flicker of blue he'd have been a lot more precise but Naruto didn't give him that long; the entire rock, definitely a rough sphere, stretched out below and before them, the distant blazing light whole above them as they suddenly came to halt above it,

"Brace yourselves," Naruto called and despite himself Jace clutched the pyromancers' arm tighter, only adrenaline stopping him wincing as she did the same and her nails dug in, "it might get bumpy."

That was all the warning they had before they dropped, the featureless rocks below them gaining in sudden and terrible clarity as they free-fell though, sensing around him with a flicker of mana, Jace was able to prevent his companion making a mistake,

"No," luckily his voice broke her concentration before he was forced to expend his meagre reserves, "we're safe."

"How the hell…?"

"There's mana all around us," though it cost him a quarter of what he had left he let the power of water flow around them, suffusing the nothingness behind Naruto aquamarine as it highlighted the invisible colourless mana trailing in his wake, "it's stopping us falling."

"How did you, in fact forget it," the azure glow faded into her, Jace's power rebuffed as she slowly absorbed some of the shapeless mana into herself, "get what you can, we might need it." He nodded and focussed, forcing his mind calm and allowing the shapeless to flow into him. It was directionless and diffused the strength he'd taken

from Ravnica but it was powerful and, should the worst happen, he could only hope it would be enough.

Logic, however, told him that should this end badly, hope was likely a fools' errand.

The end, when it came, was much softer than either of them had feared; Naruto had dragged them the whole way with his invisible colourless mana and preceded their plunge towards his unknown destination. From what they could see of it beneath the cruel glare of the furiously harsh white fire now above them it was an empty wasteland of jagged rocks and naught else, then Naruto suddenly stopped about twenty or thirty feet in the air, even having the gall to wave as they plunged past. Still absorbing the latent colourless mana around them the two planeswalkers had little time to react but mercifully the landing was soft, the residual navy of Jace's illumination spell suddenly condensing under them, acting as a cushion before dispersing. Despite this Jace still stumbled only for a firm grip to haul him upright just as a massive mana flare went off overhead and then vanished,

"Up," Chandra's voice was strangely calm, "get ready."

"Ready for…" she wasn't looking at him, she was looking above with her face expressionless and, as soon as he turned around, he realised why, ."..oh."

As a natural telepath Jace had always had an instinctive grasp of the psyche, one that the ignition of his spark and subsequent training had only improved. Because of that training the rational part of his training carried on working like a well-oiled machine even as his instinct shrivelled in horror; *the mana flare never died.* Like all beings humans had tolerances for what they could comprehend and Jace knew what he was seeing was so far beyond what he'd thought possible he could no longer understand it, rationalise it or even try to trick or fight or run from it - all he knew was that unlike the madman

from Zendikar this time his and Chandras' fates were solely in the hands of the planeswalker who had led them here.

Naruto, or at least the thing that had been Naruto, was radiant with mana beyond anything Jace had felt before. Colourless, it leaked from another gash into the Blind Eternities, connected to its wielder like a strange umbilical cord and inundating him with more raw mana than the Ravnican had even dreamed a mortal frame could contain. He could no longer see the other planeswalker, just a single, shimmering slash against the blackness above them as his body glowed from the power within; suddenly the slash widened, Jace caught by surprise as the colossal bolt suddenly streaked towards the ground. *That much* ; a strange calmness settled over him as he calculated his odds of survival; *none* . Emboldened by the certainty of death he had enough time to glance over and offer a last smile and shrug to his companion even as she looked away, eyes shut and fists clenched, both awaiting the inevitable that came a split-second later…

… and then it went.

How strange ; the mana was too bright to look at directly but he could see it passing straight through the rocks, coring into the earth like a needle; *what is he planning? That much mana, will he blow this place apart?* He didn't dwell long on the question, instead glancing over his shoulder as he heard a sigh from behind him,

"You're here so I'm either in hell or still alive," Chandra stated, scowling as she saw both Jace and the pillar of power behind him, "are we dead Beleren?"

"If we are it's your hell; there's no fire about," he pointed out but the pyromancer didn't seem to hear him; instead she squatted, one hand touching the scattered rocks beneath her boots. She must have felt something in the stone, something that made her look up at the Ravnican as though seeing through him,

"Jace," he licked dry lips as she pulled her goggles down; *that never bodes well* ; "jump!"

He'd been ready the second the crimson glass had replaced her eyes, a mix of experience and gut instinct trusting her enough to obey, a spark of blue mana propelling him towards the black sky. With a roar and bright glare Chandra was onto him, wings of dragonfire blossoming from her back and sweeping her aloft as she caught the mind-mage by his shoulders, carrying him as a hawk would a mouse. It was hardly comfortable and even less dignifying but as a shimmering blue disc solidified under his feet Jace was able to ease the burden on the pair of them,

"What's going on?"

"My arms just stretched a foot; you're heavier than you look." Silently praying for patience he tried again,

"I meant below."

"It's fire Jace," Chandra's wings were beating softly, letting her look down, "I don't know how but that's red mana."

"Red? That's impossible; if it were that hot," a glance at the continuous lance had him blinking spots out of his eyes, "we should be ashes by now."

"I know but we're not, let's be grateful for that, look," he followed her nod and his breath caught in his throat; where they had recently stood was being slowly sublimed to molten redness, the stone turning to magma under the touch of mana that potent, "and it's going down, like he's trying to melt it all."

"Why? If he wanted us dead…" He was cut off by another sound, a low, slow rumble that swiftly grew until both had to cover their ears, Jaces' disc now solid enough to bear his weight. Blocking out as much of the hateful noise as they could the planeswalkers glanced around to see the effect of whatever spell the madman was calling

down; they didn't have to wait long as a pulse of purest green passing down the pillar of white fire and into the softened rock. It vanished for a heartbeat, then another before with a noise like the end of the world the ground off to their left as far as they could see shattered and collapsed.

Nothing before or after his spark had ignited had left Jace Beleren as humbled as he felt at that moment; had Naruto done the same upon Ravnica he doubted anything would have been left. Only the basic need to preserve his hearing stopped his arms dropping as his jaw did, mocking words echoing in his ears as he stared at the devastation; *we willed our desires upon the worlds, and the worlds obeyed - is this what you meant Bolas? Is this the power the older ones had when the spark burned brightest?* The thought was chilling but displaced mercifully quickly, further rumbling and explosions from all around telling him the all-but-omnipotent being behind them wasn't done. Countless green pulses were sent into the now-molten ground, each one greeting with tectonic shifts as the land heaved, threatening to split apart entirely.

Suddenly there was a flash of red, Chandra's wings sweeping her over the destruction; he thought of going after her but as she banked back thought better of it, instead mentally erecting a sphere around him to block out most of the noise. This done, he was able to use his hands to push it outwards, its surface extending and engulfing the red-aligned planeswalker who arrowed back towards him,

"Jace, Jace," her shout echoed within his dampening sphere as he frantically signalled her to take her hands off her ears, "huh, oh, neat trick." He nodded at her praise before turning more serious,

"How bad is it?" She shook her head, wings beating lazily and sending embers spiralling,

"I've heard of geomancy and lithomancy but this isn't either; it's just, destruction," Jace saw his reflection in her goggles, as pensive and panicked as she was, "everything's broken like a dragon in a mud-hut village. I can't even see how far it's gone; can you…?"

"No; I have terrible trouble reading your mind when it's aflame, trying to link to his would likely kill me," Jace admitted, goading his disc closer to the hovering pyromancer, "all I know is he's not trying to kill us, if he was we'd be dead long before now."

"So why are we here?" Chandra's wings shrank a little as he approached - she might not have liked the Ravnican but right now he was another survivor and the best company she had, "Is he just gloating, no," her throat bobbed as she swallowed, "he's destroying; this is it Jace, he's going to unmake the plane and us with it, he must have done the same thing with Illustria."

"So why keep us alive?"

"How the hell do I know - sparks maybe, he wouldn't be the first who'd killed for that."

"He hasn't killed us and gods know he could have. There's something else going on, something we haven't seen," he was more grateful than he let on when she nodded; two people believing in his theory gave him a lot more confidence than going solo, "be ready for absolutely anything." Despite herself she snorted, folding her arms in mid-air,

"Sorry, who was it got us off the ground in the first place?" *She's got me there* ; swallowing the prang Jace merely nodded, coming to her side to better see the violent beacon of pure mana who seemed bent on tearing the world around them apart.

Eventually even terror gives way to boredom.

Encased within Jace's defensive spell the two planeswalkers were cocooned from the worst of the tumult outside, watching on as an incredible amount of mana was poured into the rocks below, the pure white-hot red interspersed with pulses of green that made the earth judder. Watching on and counted ten under her breath, Chandra sighed as it seemed the process showed no signs of slowing down,

"Channelling that much mana, he should be a crisp by now," she declared, shifting her shoulders as her wings continued to beat slowly, "I've never heard of any planeswalker doing this, or any artefact either."

"And I've heard only legends," Jace added, repositioning himself to avoid being scorched by her fiery pinions, "you have enough mana to hold yourself up?" Chandra chuckled,

"It was soaking through the rock I touched; I could stay here forever if I had to."

"After just a few seconds contact? That shouldn't be possible but, wait, no it makes perfect sense; I have it!"

"If your next word is eureka I will punch you," Chandra's warning was only half-serious as she leant in, "what?"

"Remember Illustria, and the plane after, the mana there was so easy to touch; this is why, Naruto is the reason Chandra," she'd never seen the mind-mage this excited before, it was quite funny, "he knew about the planes we travelled to because they're his, he gave them mana like he's doing here."

"Gave them mana? But how would he get there, how did he know where Illustria was, it's…" she wanted to say impossible but she'd seen impossible too often today for it to have any meaning so quickly changed her track, ".. and anyway the only thing he's making here is a mess. Look at this place," now more than ever the ground beneath them was a wasteland, dribbles of lava oozing from the hole bored through the rock, "and it wasn't much to look at before. Now what?"

"No idea, we'll have to wait and see." Chandra shot him a quizzical look, light flashing off her goggles before she seemed to realise something and pointed forwards,

"Not for long, it's stopped."

Jace paused a second before realising the pyromancer was right; even through his partially sound-proofed sphere they'd been subject to continuous, uninterrupted Armageddon all around them - now all was eerily silent. The child, still suspended by his plait into the Eternities, was still, no fire flying from his feet and Jace needed no further bidding, his eyes glowing as he willed the aether to bend through his pupils, glimpsing into the future. It was unwise to look too far for fear of second-guessing yourself, a trap he'd fallen into several times but, right now, his foresight left him certain of what to do. Caught unawares Chandra yelled as she was tackled from the side, a shock of icy blue mana dispersing her wings,

"Stay still," Jace demanded, holding tightly to stop her falling off the platform he willed downward, "we've got to drop; if you know any defensive spells at all now's the time"; *seven seconds…* ;

"Let go!"

"Don't fall, we have to stay low," Jace warned before complying, taking a half-step away and quickly moving through complicated patterns in the air with his hands, all the time ticking off the count in his head. The shield around them grew denser, bolstered by his mana to become semi-opaque but it didn't block out the sight of what came next; above them the small figure twitched, no more than that, before with a whirling howl new destruction was unleashed upon this cursed earth.

The earth had stopped them seeing what his red mana had done but in the sky there was no such defence; twin hurricanes of blue and white, one before and one behind the dangling figure, tore through the nothingness, the umbilical into the Blind Eternities disgorging yet more mana through its wielder. The sphere became quickly smeared, lashed by a liquid neither planewalker spared much thought for; their minds were fixed solely on the symphony of obliteration above them,

"Have you ever summoned anything like this?"

"I wouldn't even try," his answer was as much a croak as her question, "if we hadn't moved we'd have been blown to pieces."

"And if we hadn't gone up we'd never have survived that long," it was her tone, thoughtful, quiet and much unlike the Chandra he was familiar with, that made the Ravnican look over in time to see her lift her eyewear, brow furrowed and deeply pensive, "red and blue Jace, if we didn't know the spells or mana that got us out of there we'd be dead now."

"Would we? No, I'm not arguing," he held up a hand as she scowled, "what I mean is fire that hot, white hot, it should have charred us to bones where we stood so why didn't it? And here," he pointed up to the twin twisters above them, each one disgorging a monsoons' fury with every fraction of a heartbeat, "it's almost directly away from us. It's like he was protecting us somehow, or at least aiming away."

"Good point, actually," she stepped toward the barrier, "can you let some of this through?"

"It could be poisonous."

"Just a drop," she persisted and, despite his misgivings, Jace carefully weakened a sliver of his ward, sealing it back up the instant a few sparkling drops landed on the back of the pyromancer's hand. He watched on eagle-eyed as the fire-maned woman carefully touched the tiny pool, then sniffed it and probed it with her tongue before finally letting it spill, breathing heavily. Jace stepped forwards, unsettled and unsure why she seemed so affected,

"Chandra what is it?"

"Water," she mumbled, "it's just water. Water, fire, earth," she pointed above them, "and air. I was wrong Jace; Illustria was never my plane."

"Don't say that," the Ravnican surprised himself with the brusqueness of his voice but as it made the firebrand flash him a

sharp look he considered it worthwhile, "the only one of us who knows what's going on is the one making it happen. Until it ends we're just guessing, there's no point in that - we know Naruto doesn't want to kill us so when he's finished we'll ask him. He said he had a story to tell us; I'll wait for the denouement."

All was still for a moment between them, their bubble shield an oasis of calm in the turbulence around them until Chandra smiled, something that made Jace wince a second later as she swatted his shoulder,

"I'd agree if I knew what a denouement was; sounds like something dirty. Have you been reading gutter-trash novels again Beleren?"

"No I have not and a de…"

"Aha, I knew it," she cackled, "so you've read them before. Who'd have guessed, the stoic mind-mage has a trace of corruption in him; you don't tap the odd swamp now and then do you?"

"I can kick you out of this barrier Nalaar," the Ravnican threatened, eyes glowing again, "and the more you go on the better an idea that sounds." She merely grinned,

"For someone so level-headed you're easy to wind up; cool off Jace, your barrier's glowing."

"Yes, my barrier, something the 'always on the attack' pyromancer would be severely lost without," he cut in acidly, "and it's not glowing."

"It is, you've flared too much mana into it," Chandra argued, glancing at the now rain-lashed transparent shield only to find she was wrong, "holy pyres of every plane, look! The sky!"

"I see it," Jace agreed, as awestruck as his companion at the transformation above them; where before there had been naught but

darkness a deep blue now glowed, a blue that was lightening by the second, "how is he doing this with mana alone?"

"No idea but it's not all he's doing; gods Jace the light," Chandra's finger tracked across to the brightest light in the sky, no longer stark white above them, "it's a bloody *sun!* "

The Ravnican sat down before he fell, even his brain unable to compute so much in so little time,

"This is madness," he said, half to himself, "even those who persisted past the Mending, who 'walked in planes made by other 'walkers; there's no records of this. It took years, decades to create the smallest of planes when 'walkers were as gods."

"He's no planeswalker, not as we know the word," Chandra sat next to him, gazing at the figure lost in the centre of the maelstrom with reverent awe, "so what is he?" Jace shook his head,

"I don't know Chandra."

" *Bugger; so much for asking you then!"*

The voice made both planeswalkers jump, Jace fastest to react as he put a finger to his temple, hardly daring to believe who he was hearing,

" *Naruto?* "

" *Who else but?* "

" *How are you doing this?* "

" *A little trick called multi-tasking, ask Chandra-san about*," the snort from the side of him let the mind-mage know he wasn't the only one in the mental conversation, " *listen, sorry about the mess but it should be over soon. Once I've done this bit you can come out that bubble but don't go on the floor 'til I send out the last wave* ."

" *Last wave?* " Chandra's voice was a psychic thunderclap, " *What else are you doing?"*

" *Plenty but it shouldn't take long, one big pulse should do it, this is a fairly standard job,"* Naruto answered even if the twin storms he was controlling never wavered, " *well, better get back to it* ."

" *Wait*," Jace cut in, ignoring Chandra's scandalised expression, " *just one question - why didn't you tell us what you were doing here, or give us a warning at least?"* There was silence and Jace thought the connection severed until, at length, a quiet reply came though,

" *If I had told you would either of you have believed me?* "

"Not really much you can say to that," Chandra said a moment later, watching the raging gale above them play out after Naruto's voice faded from their minds, "and I knew you were stuck-up Jace but really, you asked him that while he was in the middle of controlling this?"

"It was a valid question," he defended before admitting, "and a valid answer - I doubt there's anyone in the Multiverse who'd have taken him seriously if he'd told the truth."

"Really? Even crazy-dragon-man from Zendikar?" Jace opened his mouth to answer, then closed it and thought for a minute before correcting himself,

"Alright, nobody sane in the Multiverse," he conceded, hood rustling as he shook his head, "and as I sit here under this lightening sky I wonder, have I lost my mind as well?"

"That was strangely poetic, and don't worry too much about it; if you're mad so am I."

"Indeed," despite himself Jace smiled, glancing over at her, "for me a tragedy, for you a slight divergence from the norm." A second later he was extinguishing his cloak as a small snake of fire bit into it,

"And there's more where that came from," the pyromaster warned, fingers flickering threateningly, "honestly, try to say something nice and get a mouthful of smarm for it, why do I bother?"

"No idea, you usually wouldn't; when I heard you were on Ravnica the first time I expected my house and at least the surrounding quarter to go up in flames before you left."

"Don't tempt me," she warned, though her chuckle undermined the warning before the noise outside began to drop. Glancing up and seeing the maelstrom at last beginning to calm Jace stood, offering a hand to pull Chandra up as well as with a gesture he lowered their ward by degrees.

The sweetness of the wind was like honey, the soft breeze making Chandra's hair sway; blue mana was on the air, filling Jace's lungs as he inhaled, the sun above them glowing yellow in a pale blue sky. Familiarity with the noise off to his left made him glance over and then gape; *the destruction, he covered it with this?* ;

"Nalaar…"

"Wow," she sounded as awed as he felt, "it's definitely water?"

"Definitely, I can smell salt," the breeze from this new dark sea stung his eyes, the foamy waves crashing on the bare rocks below, "first he made an ocean basin, then he filled it with an ocean."

"And he's planning something else; here he comes now," forewarned, Jace tore his eyes from the endless grey water before him to see its creator descend. The connection to the ethereal Eternities spooling behind him like a marionettes' string, both planeswalkers tensed as he neared the surface only to breathe out relieved as he tapped down without further world-shattering calamity. All was still for a second, a second in which the onlookers could both pick Naruto out in the glare, his form dimmer than it had been but still alight with colourless mana. Only his eyes were unchanged, the ripple patterns unmoving as his hands came together, flicking

through patterns neither of them were close enough to see as he called out words in a language they had never heard,

" *Ninshuu*," he started to glow again, his connection to the Eternities swelling as it fed him power beyond reckoning, " *Sekai no rimeiku no kotan!* "

He fell to his knees, slamming his hands into the rocks about his feet, now solid again after his fire had melted it en route to igniting the worlds' core. Those same rocks, and everything else around him, were then reduce to dust by the mana he unleashed, a rapidly-expanding circle that left the ground cover in powder and Chandra swearing, having almost toppled backwards as her seat gave a sudden lurch upwards,

"Warning next time Beleren!"

"Black mana"; *he didn't even apologise - that's settled, as soon as it's safe I'm beating him bloody* ; "it's turned the stone to powder." Peering over from her now-birds eye view Chandra had to agree, the rocks the ocean hadn't drowned now no longer existed; *the ocean!* Even as she thought of it she saw the change there and understood what was happening,

"Not just black Jace look, the shore," the mana had worked there too but, rather than grey, the dust left in the mana's wake was golden, "its sand!"

"Black and green, maybe white too; gods above and beyond he's not made dust, its soil!"

"Take us down," she demanded, wonder coursing through her veins and unusually Jace didn't argue, nor did he advise caution. The platform fell away, Chandra leaping from it as soon as it was safe enough; her boot-soles bit into honest earth, the smell like perfume as she reached down to touch the new land; it was thin, slightly loamy but it was real and alive; Jace dismissed his floating platform in time to hear her laugh,

"Flowers," she said almost absently, touching one of the blooms sprouting in the new ground, looking up at Jaces' shadow as grass pushed through around her feet, "Illustria was never my plane."

"No," Jace agreed, watching over her shoulder as, in the distance, the brown soil was heaved aside, thick-trunked trees forcing their way upwards and unfurling branches into the light of the new sun, "and I have to wonder after seeing this how many planes are really… Naruto!"

At his sudden shout Chandra looked up to see a collapsed figure lying very still, then she was

snapping at Jaces' heels, the Ravnican already sprinting towards the downed boy.

It was only as Jace knelt by his side the firebrand truly realised Naruto, despite his unearthly power, was just a child. He was barely half the Ravnicans' height and Jace wasn't particularly tall but right now that didn't matter; seeing the fingers on his neck Chandra tried hard not to imagine Brannon lying in his place,

"How is he?" Jace looked as concerned as she felt but before he could say anything the orange bundle shuffled enough to croak,

"M'okay."

"You are certainly not 'okay'," Jace cut in, trying to recall any healing magic he knew; *precious little, and I'd wager Chandra's the same* ; "I've no idea what you've done or how but you should be dead!"

"An' you don't know how right you are," the shorter figure croaked, somehow managing to get a hand underneath him and heave himself painfully back to his knees, "sorry but I have to recover now, it could take a while."

"Take as long as you need, just promise you'll explain what you've done when you've rested." Somehow the exhausted child managed to smile, giving a shaky thumbs-up at the pensive pyromaster,

"Believe it; now back up a bit, actually back up a lot," a mere spark of mana caught light on his thumb and both did as they were bid, watching as Naruto traced his thumb across the air, a white split appearing; *why would he…?* Jace's question went unanswered as the gate to the aether was suddenly forced open, a formless mass oozing through from the other side. Terror biting deep into his soul the Ravnican could only watch as a monstrous figure, kin to something he had only glimpsed before, bled into reality, blocking out the new suns' light as it stood to its full, hideous height. Time stood still, then a single tentacle, shapeless, pulsating and sickly, extruded from its centre, aiming at the speck of orange lying helpless beneath it; *he summoned it? But that's…*

"No!" The shout snapped him out of his horrified realisations to see Chandra stand tall, blazing like a torch with her gauntlets plugged in. He was just fast enough, the pyromancer's flaming trail evaporated a sheen of pure blue mana and she span on him, eyes blazing and face struck with betrayal as the appendage engulfed the helpless child,

"Murderer!" She screamed, the ground around her scorched black in her fury, "Heartless bastard, he didn't deserve that!"

"Wait, please Chandra wait," he pleaded, arms raised as he deflected shots of flame, hoping to calm her outrage, "Naruto's not dead; let me explain."

"Talk fast," she demanded, not letting up in the attack as the flame from her hair began to kindle into a fearsome bird of prey,

"It's his summon Chandra," Jace shouted, a swiftly-conjured illusion distracting her phoenix as it lunged for him, "he called it here from the Blind Eternities. I've seen these things before on Zendikar!" The

fire banked slightly, Chandra pausing in her furious attack as the planes' name resonated,

"When?"

"After you were gone from the Eye I took a ship to Halimar and on the way something like this ate my steed; at the order I found out about them. Remember, we were there just before Illustria?" Chandra paused, the shadow of her phoenix sweeping over both of them in sharp circles as the red of her eyes reappearing from the pits of flame they'd become,

"The mermen, but," her eyes snapped onto the massive being now stood like a grotesque sentinel over this new world, "he said about the old gods and their heralds; *this* is one of them?" The Ravnican nodded, feeling cold inside as he turned to that monstrous silhouette,

"An Eldrazi," even to a plane where death walked close to every shoulder that name was a terror, "a monster that destroys planes and devours mana; they were the ideas of the Blind Eternities."

Chandra's mana flared for a heartbeat before it collapsed in on itself, her phoenix giving a last keening cry before vanishing in smoke as she regarded him severely,

"The ideas?" Jace nodded,

"Look at it Chandra, it's everything you'd expect an idea to be. Crude, shapeless, waiting to be sculpted but undeniably powerful for being unfinished, just as Naruto described. The Eldrazi, most of them, are beyond the colours of mana and now I know why; they were never from the planes, they originated in the spaces between."

"Native to the Eternities," she agreed before stiffening, "and one of them was bound to him before he ascended, well something like that, I can't remember the word he used. When his spark ignited it merged with him; is he an Eldrazi too?"

"I don't know but, going on what we do know, I'd wager pretty much every book in my collection that he's not going to be killed by one."

"Heh, enough kindling to last a year there; okay Beleren," with a hiss and pop she disengaged her gauntlets, "I'll wait and if you're right I won't be frying you today."

"I prostrate myself at your mercy," he cut back waspishly, thinly amused as Chandra quirked an eyebrow at his confusticating language, "so it appears we're waiting here for Naruto to revive. A good plan," he sat down and then reclined in the new grass, breathing out a gaseous wisp to keep watch, "wake me when he's ready."

"Wait, you're just going to sleep?"

"Indeed I am," he pulled down his hood to block out the overhead light, "and I'd be most appreciative if you could somehow keep the noise down." There was silence, blessed silence long enough to take in and savour a breath before, as he knew would happen, his companion opened her mouth and murdered it,

"You are the most, most… oh forget it," the Ravnican smiled, grateful his hood stopped her seeing it as she stomped away, "the bloody Eldrazi-thing's better company than you!" Fortunately she didn't hear his chuckle as he slipped into a half-trance, his warning illusion primed to snap him to full alertness the instant anything went amiss - promises or not he wasn't fool enough to lower his guard around something as dangerous as the beast that had engulfed Naruto. He slipped into meditation, calming his mind and logically going over all that had happened on this extraordinary day and, more importantly, how it could potentially impact not just Ravnica but also the entire Multiverse; *especially* ; a sudden coldness opened in his gut as the childs' voice whispered to him once again; *as Naruto said he seeks to end it* .

The thought gave him pause but perhaps not as much as it should have done; though he'd not known Naruto long and their introduction

had been far less than cordial, to say nothing of the world-shattering power he possessed, something about the child forestalled his usual nihilistic paranoia. He was first to admit he thought little of people in general and had scars from several betrayals for proof as to why but with Naruto, he just couldn't see him falling to madness or grandeur as many spark-bearers had. Breathing in and out again, one of the simplest magical exercises, he filtered through his experiences of today and tried to fit them into scientific reasons for them occurring; *light, when it moves through a medium it splits, hence rainbows occurring. Would that even happen in air, hence the sky turning blue, and if so why didn't Chandra and I asphyxiate when we landed…?*

Time fell away while he was thinking, his trance lasting as long as it needed to; he had several ideas of what had happened but there was only one way of getting them confirmed. Letting out a yawn and dismissing his conjured familiar he sat up only to freeze in horror as a streak of red shot up in front of him,

"Nalaar what are you doing?!"

"You've got eyes," she shouted back as he scrambled upright, too late to stop her launching a spit of flame towards the silent Eldrazi. Appalled he saw the shot strike home; the creature didn't flinch, twitch or otherwise react to the fire, it just seemed to swallow it. Evidently Chandra seemed to regard that as a challenge, another flare covering her hands as Jace pelted towards her,

"You're mad," he declared, half in exasperation and half in wonder - of all the planeswalkers he knew only Chandra would be both foolish and headstrong enough to tackle something like this without help, "what are you trying to do, melt Naruto out of there?"

"Or get this thing to do something," she admitted, glancing over her shoulders with goggles in place, "I tried talking to it, shouting at it, trying to speak to Naruto inside it and now this," she hurled the conjured flame into the mighty beast, thought it proved as ineffective as the last, "what is this thing made of?"

"I'm amazed."

"I know, even if it can't feel pain it should react to fire right?"

"Not that, I'm amazed you tried talking first," Jace explained, chuckling at the rude gesture she flicked his way before conjuring a spear of white flame, "though while you were throwing fire at the huge monstrosity from outside existence as we know it, did you not stop to consider what would happen if said monstrosity took offence at having fire thrown at it?"

"I started small."

"Of course you did"; *I give up* ; "just be grateful it's in a good mood or you'd have a lot of angry tentacles to deal with." She almost dropped her spear, staring at him,

"That's disgusting!"

"It's the truth; if it wanted to attack us we'd both be being absorbed by now." Chandra stared, blinked and stared some more, looking to find any hint, the merest trace the mind-mage was playing her but saw nothing, he honestly seemed clueless; *I give up* ;

"Go back to reading your denouements Jace, you might learn something," she muttered, drawing her arm back for the cast and letting fly,

"Nice throw," he commented, following its blazing trail, "been keeping in practise?"

"Yeah, never know when you might have to nail a rabbit for dinner, or a nosey mind-mage out of principle."

"I think you'd find me a harder target than him and if I remember rightly the score between us is in my favour."

"Only 'cause you cheated…"

She tailed off as finally one of her continued barrage of low-mana fire spells got attention; there was a ripple in the Eldrazi's chest and the spear tip was caught, flickering to nothing in the grip of a human hand. Both planeswalkers stepped back a bit as the hand was joined by its twin before, with an athletic twist, the boy who had formerly seemed on the edge of exhaustion leapt to the ground, twisting like an acrobat to avoid any injury before stretching up,

"Ahhh, great rest," he exclaimed before glancing behind him, "thanks pal, you better get back now, I've got some 'splaining to do." Jace could have sworn the Eldrazi nodded, just fractionally, before its bulk began to effervesce, dispersing into nothingness as Naruto stepped forwards before appearing to remember something, putting two fingers of each hand before him in a crossed gesture; *what does that mean?* As soon as the smoke cleared and the Ravnican found himself staring down a dozen of the child who could crush him in an instant, he once more cursed his curiosity,

"Whoa," Chandra, of course, ignored peril, "what are they?"

"On my plane we'd call them kage bunshin, shadow clones; they're a kind of mana simulacrum that can think and work away from me."

"Neat trick," she admitted, watching the orange bodies either rushing away or disappearing in swirls of leaves or, in one case, through the Blind Eternities, "what are they doing?"

"Scutwork; getting the salinity levels of the seas sorted, making sure rare metal deposits are in the right place, basically just tidying up and making sure all's where it should be," Naruto explained as he approached, stopping a few feet from them all looking as hearty as he had before his work began, "anyway here we are, the denouement as it were," Chandra snorted, shooting Jace a sly look while he shook his head at her childishness, "and I have to say I'm quite surprised. Half of me was afraid I'd wake up and see the two of you trying to kill each other."

"What was your other half afraid of?" Fortunately Jace didn't see either Narutos' corner of the eye glance or the pyromancer left clutching her nose as he spoke up,

"Fortunately we managed to avoid that unpleasantness, not through lack of trying," oddly Chandra didn't react at his flaying glare, in fact she wasn't looking at him at all, and was she blushing; *strange woman* ; "and I had some time to think. That creature you summoned, it was an Eldrazi?"

"It was," Naruto confirmed, sitting on the warm grass and bidding them do the same, "I heard some of your thoughts while I was recovering; don't worry, I have to concentrate really hard and be close to people to do that, I can't read minds anywhere near as well as you can."

"Good," Chandra sniffed, repressing the unsubtle pictures Naruto had thrust into her mind; *and Jace can never know about!* ; "one like him's enough. But the Eldrazi - I'm first to admit I'm no expert on them but didn't something happen on Zendikar that meant they were there, and what happened to your eyes back there?" Ocean blue looked up at her then split into the concentric rings she'd seen before, the sight unsettling and she was grateful when he dropped the transformation,

"Had them since my ascension, they help me see how things need to be," Naruto explained briefly before moving on to what he knew was likely to be a sore topic for the two planeswalkers, "anyway lots of things happened on Zendikar, in fact most roads cross there but let's start at the beginning. As you guessed the Eldrazi are the ideas of the Eternities, the methods by which the end would be undone. However, as I'm sure you know, once you have an idea you always look for ways to modify and improve it, all sorts of tangents spark off your core idea and the same thing happened in this case. Each of the big three, the Eldrazi idea-titans if you will, has a brood of lesser ideas that trace their lineage back to him, hence the Zendikar gods and their heralds."

"So the Eldrazi were spawned from the Eternities; how did they get to Zendikar?"

"They were lured and trapped there by three of the great planeswalkers; for the best, considering the damage they were doing. It was only by luck that when they were released I was close enough to sense it and deal with them before they ate the plane. I absorbed them into the Eternities again, explained that their brother idea had been realised and I would see that which had created them undone; luckily, after that they went quietly."

"If they're that powerful though, how were they trapped?" Chandra enjoyed a good story and it was a fine day on this plane mere hours old, "And more importantly how did they get free?" Naruto didn't answer for a minute, seemingly pensive, but eventually he sighed and spoke,

"They were attracted by the Roil, the mana there so powerful it caught their attention. While they were trying to, ah, educate the masses the planeswalkers had devised a trap to contain them within the hedrons. It worked, locking and sealing the Eldrazi titans and their broods away behind innumerable traps and dangers where hopefully they would get free again; however"; *forgive me for what I say now* ; "that hope was later dashed. What was locked could be unlocked the same way; at the Eye of Ugin three sparks entered and left, but they weren't the only things to leave."

A horrible, crawling cold clawed its way up Jaces' spine,

"But we were… no, the dragon-mage," for once he cursed his near-perfect memory, "he was a planeswalker as well!"

"His was the third spark."

"No," Jace held his head in his hands, the horror he had seen stalking across Zendikar now shown in a new and far more terrible light, "we didn't, damn it we didn't know!"

"Know what?" Chandra, loathe as she was to admit it, knew she wasn't as smart as the Ravnican, hence why dealing with him was such a pain, "What about the Eye?"

"It was us Chandra; the scroll was a map to them," the mind-mages' voice was leaden with self-loathing, "us and that shape-shifter unlocked their prison; we set the Eldrazi free."

For the first time Jace saw his words utterly stun the firebrand but what should have been a sweet moment tasted only of ashes,

"How," she breathed, face bloodless, "was it the fight?"

"The heat without light, the colourless fire," Jace moaned; it all made horrible, horrible sense, "it was the key?"

"The final one yes, in the presence of three planeswalker sparks."

"I cast it," Chandra's voice was dead, looking at her hands as though she'd never seen them before, "it set, I set them free. I should have burnt that scroll to ashes, I should never have…"

"Should and would don't matter - listen to me, both of you," Naruto was on his feet, a sudden edginess to him that shook both planeswalkers out of their aghast dolour, "what happened at the Eye wasn't your fault, not entirely. Other factors were at play there that might have seen the Eldrazi unleashed regardless - I'm actually glad it was you who found me, it gave me a chance to set this straight."

"We found you?" Naruto nodded at the mind-mages' question,

"I've met many like you since I began this work and I made a promise that I would reveal myself to the first planeswalker or walkers to set foot on one of my planes," Naruto explained, smiling gently as realisation dawned on their faces, "you Chandra-san, on Illustria as it's now named. The Eldrazi knew your sparks and because of that I realised what role you'd had in releasing them and how much it was likely to hurt you both if you found out. Trust me,"

there was hard assurance in his tone as his smile strained a little, "I know what it means to blame yourself, and be blamed, from things you couldn't control."

Naruto wasn't sure if it was the right time to admit such things but it seemed to work; neither of the older 'walkers were looking as depressed as they had before, Chandra even managing a wry smile,

"Known by the ideas of most of the mana in the Multiverse? Heh I feel important," she chuckled brittlely, "so what happened once they were released?"

"They went about doing things as they had before; time restrained didn't teach them much," Naruto admitted heavily before, doomed by his depressive nihilism to know how bad things were likely to be, Jace forced himself to ask,

"What would they do though? You said these three ideas had different methods, and what about the fourth?" Naruto paused, regarding both him and the pyromancer for what felt like a long time before, to his relief, the boy nodded,

"I suppose it can't hurt to tell you since they'll not do anything again; alright," he nodded, stretching off and idly wondering where his most important clone was; *if he's stopped for a snack on the way I'm holding him head-first in a swamp until the bubbles stop* ; "first thing is you've probably already heard their names, or parts of them anyway. The planeswalkers who trapped the titans named them and when they left the Zendikarians took on those names to mean their gods; Ula, Cozi and Emeria."

"Those gods actually do exist then, in a way at least."

"They do, and strangely enough if there was ever a plane that deserved gods like them Zendikar would be it. The oldest and most powerful in a way is Emrakul; he would undo the end by tearing down the barrier between the Eternities and the Multiverse, hence the older planeswalkers called him the Aeons Torn. Second to him is

Ulamog, the Infinite Gyre who'd destroy everything in the hope that when all was nothing something else would be reborn. Kozilek was third, he would enlighten those in the Multiverse to the truth of what had happened in the hope they'd find a way to undo it; unfortunately doing this had the side-effect of complete and utter insanity, hence his moniker of the Butcher of Truth. Those were the three that were trapped on Zendikar while the fourth," Naruto paused, thinking of how to frame what he had to say next in a way that wouldn't arouse too much suspicion, "he was never named, a tragedy and a mistake. He tried to give something to the Multiverse but chose poorly who received his gift, dying as he tried to reclaim it from the one he had given it to. The Multiverse has suffered much because of that poor choice and the misuse of its power, but it won't suffer any more," there was hardness in his eye, a razor edge to his smile that neither planeswalker felt the urge to challenge,

"Glad to hear it, and thanks for clearing up our mistake up as well," Chandra offered, for once reasonably humble as Naruto chuckled,

"Like I say don't worry; once I met the three on Zendikar and they realised I would undo the end they went back to the Eternities. While I was in Zendikar I managed to calm the place down as well so all's well that ends well." Jace jolted,

"Wait, you calmed the plane - as in *the* Calming? What did you do to the Roil?"

"Dispersed it between the plane and the Eternities, took a night or so. Don't know what happened to make the mana that unstable but it can't have been anything good. Still it's sorted now and I made Illustria a few days after that, my first restructuring actually, so that Eye of Hope business took the heat off me." Mention of Zendikar's new star made Chandra look towards the sky,

"That reminds me; the sun, did you make that as you made this plane?"

"The nebula did, it's how stars are born; you can't do that with just mana, one of the reasons the light of suns and stars penetrates the Blind Eternities. That's how Ravnica got the one that led you to me," Naruto didn't miss the definite flicker of interest in Jaces' eye; *perfect, keep reeling while the other pieces are gathered* ; "you can do things once they're born though. I had to do a bit of ageing to that ball of fire up there; clones with temporal magic are awesome for that."

"How much aging?"

"Five hundred billion years give or take," Naruto said blithely, not giving them a chance to look shocked as he went on, "but anyway, that's my story; I'm Uzumaki Naruto, a planeswalker whose spark merged with an Eldrazi as it ignited and is therefore bound to undo the end that created most of the Blind Eternities. In doing this I've got to end the Multiverse as we know it." Jace and Chandra glanced at each other before, at length, the Ravnican spoke,

"I'm assuming it's not as terrible as you make it sound."

"Nah, though you should have seen your faces in the Eternities; everyone assumes an end is a bad thing," he admitted, chuckling at the memory as he held forth a hand, "let me show you." Suddenly his palm held a spinning ball of brilliant blue, the concentrated mana sphere beautiful to behold,

"This is what was," he said before tapping the top of the sphere with his free hand. Its motion shattered, most of the ball becoming a much paler blue while fragments of deeper navy sifted slowly through the pallid bubble, "this is what is now. And this is what I must do," both planeswalkers watched as, slowly, tiny specks of light began to glow within the shattered sphere, dying away to reveal other fragments,

"You're creating new planes," Chandra's throat was dry as she beheld the bewitching spectacle, "from the Blind Eternities?"

"Yes, the ending transmuted almost everything into raw mana, it's my job to transmute it back until all the pieces are made and fit back together," the shining ball was whole again for an instant before Naruto and dispersed it, "when I'm done the Multiverse will end as the Universe is restored."

"Uni-verse," the word sounded strange on Jaces' tongue, strange but not without appeal, "so it's a conversion process? I mean, you take mana from the Eternities and convert it into planar mana."

"Basically yeah, though as you've seen it's a bit violent," Naruto admitted before suddenly beaming broadly, "though not without its rewards."

Glancing over his shoulder Jace stood and moved to the side as another Naruto stepped forwards, a set of brightly-coloured cartons in his hands,

"Sorry boss, bit of a queue."

"No worries; get out to sea, I think I made it a bit too salty out there."

"On it," the clone passed its creator its burden before saluting and running off towards the surf, Chandra watching him go and laughing slightly as he raced onto the waves,

"Can you show me how to do that?"

"I could try - why?"

"You can never have too many minions, plus more of me means more of me to burn things."

"Good point…"

"No," Jace had to pour cold water on that idea before it started catching light, "for the sake of your Uni-verse please no; one bad-tempered pyromaniac is more than enough."

"Hey, I am not bad-tempered," Chandra defended herself, Jace saying nothing but with an expression that spoke volumes as Naruto coughed to disguise his chuckling,

"And I'm supposed to be the kid here? Listen I've just finished work and I'm about to celebrate, you're both welcome to join me." He rattled one of the cups his clone had given him and, intrigued, Chandra held a hand forwards, catching the tin he tossed her,

"What is it?"

"Ramen, food of the gods," Naruto declared, peeling back the lid of his tin before frowning, "uh, needs water and to cook. Would you mind, I'm kind of dry?"

Three and a bit minutes later, swirling the salty broth around, Jace had to concede the ramen was actually quite enjoyable; *though, since Naruto's eating it, I suppose it is the food of a god* ;

"So, Naruto," Chandra spoke through a mouthful of noodles, "how many times you done this now?"

"Since I was four; jiji took me to a noodle shop and I've been going ever since." Chandra paused before swallowing, snickering at his confusion,

"Not the ramen, this," she pointed out to the horizon, the sun beginning to set and mark the end of the reborn planes' first day, "how many planes have you actually made, and how long have you been at it?"

"Uhh, no idea, I've been ad-libbing up 'til now," Naruto replied somewhat sheepishly, scratching the back of his head with a free hand, "I keep meaning to get myself a diary and write down how all this works but it always slips my mind. Don't ask about time either, I've no idea but I'm sure I haven't been about that long, certainly not more than a year."

"And two planes we know of, three if you include this one," Jace mused, drinking the dregs from his cup, "you're keen."

"No choice really," how true that was they didn't need to know; *yet* ; "sooner it's started the sooner it's done. Still, we'd best get going soon, my clones will sort the rest out."

"Uh huh," Chandra drained what was left and wiped a trickle of juice off her cheek, "that was great, where'd you get it from?" Naruto tapped his nose as he stood up, preparing for the last sacrifice to be made on this place,

"Sorry Chandra-san, trade secret; anyway, before we go mind if I ask you guys a question? Well, actually I've already asked the question but I'd be interested in your answer." Chandra caught the mind-mages' nod and replied,

"Sure, what do you need to know?"

"What am I?" Even Jace was wrong-footed by that one, though Narutos' swift explanation helped quell the confusion,

"I know I'm not a planeswalker, I can't be; my spark isn't like yours. It's merged with the Blind Eternities, it exists there, that's why I can channel so much mana and I know what I have to do, the Eternities tell me what was, I do the rest. I can travel as freely as you but," he shook his head, somewhat sad but stoic, "I'm not the same - a scion of the Eldrazi and bound to the Eternities so, what?"

There was a short silence at this, the two planeswalkers mulling the question over until one of them gave a muffled laugh,

"Hmm," Chandra struck an exaggerated thinking pose, "you bend all colours of mana to your will to make planes and stopped the Multiverse being eaten by the thoughts of the space between. I'm sure there's a word for beings like that, it's on the tip of my tongue; three letters, starts with G…" Naruto laughed,

"No chance; gods create things from scratch, I'm just rebuilding what was there originally. None of this is my own work, I'm just the prism really; it's all being made off the backs of those who were there when it used to exist. Besides how do you think that's going to go down when I meet other people; hi, nice to meet you I'm a god - they'll throw away the nuthouse key."

"I suppose not, even he's not arrogant enough to call himself a god except in front of a mirror"; *you'll get yours later* ; Jace refused to be baited even as he schemed revenge, "going by the laws of the jungle you can call yourself what you like; you can back it up better than most."

"I prefer not to fight, and trust me that's a sea-change from how I was before this happened," the ninja confessed, shrugging, "ah well, I'll have to give it more thought."

"Maker."

"Pardon?" Jace explained his choice of word,

"You do not walk the planes, you create them; therefore you are a planesmaker, quite probably the only one in the Multiverse." Naruto beamed for a moment before the expression dropped off his face,

"That was one of those you-have-a-great-power-use-it-responsibly talks wasn't it? Well, thanks for the brevity." Chandra laughed, punching the mind-mage on the shoulder,

"Subtle," she mocked, though she fractionally squeezed his arm before she withdrew her hand as at the bottom of her heart she feared the same thing the Ravnican did; *if he turns, we're all doomed* ; "still, this is your place Naruto, which way out of here?"

"One minute, last thing to do; I loved your name Chandra but the Eternities were very forceful for this one. There were powerful echoes for this plane, including its name," he raised his ramen cup

towards the setting sun and turned it, speaking as the last drops of salty broth christened the virgin earth,

"Ilyonde."

Some minutes later, encased in another bubble and speeding through the Blind Eternities with Naruto in the lead, Jace felt a tap at his shoulder and silently established a mental connection,

" *Whisper, Naruto may hear us* ."

" *Yeah*," miracle of miracle Chandra could control her volume, " *seven months Jace, that's how long he's been 'walking, or 'making in his case* ." That made him look around,

" *What makes you say that?* "

" *Because that's how long it's been getting easier*," she replied, " *think about it, because of him the Blind Eternities know that whatever created them will be fixed and they'll go back to being planes or whatever they were before right?"*

" *Right, so?* "

" *So, how much of relief is that for the Eldrazi?* " Chandra's expression was earnest, he voice gaining volume until Jace gestured for her to lower it again, " *Imagine this, you're innocent of a crime but whoever's in charge has had you locked in a room for you-don't-know how long. All you can do is grab at people when they come through your room. Suddenly in comes someone who listens to you and says don't worry, I know what's wrong and I'll get you out of here - wouldn't that make you more patient, you wouldn't fly into such a rage and leap on everyone you saw?* "

" *So the Eternities are, what, tolerating us more because of his work? It makes sense; if you start those ridiculous pyrotechnics again I will imprint an extremely irritating and catchy tune in your*

mind," Chandra scowled at the threat, though the small smoulders on the end of her braids obediently vanished, " *but I do think you're right. Bear with me a second* - Naruto?" Terminating the mental link he spoke aloud, the newly-dubbed planesmaker looking over his shoulder,

"Yeah?"

"On Ilyonde you created air from the Eternities correct?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a necessity; ever seen living things in a vacuum?"

"No, what happens?"

"You don't want to know," Naruto answered the firebrand's question warningly, "it's really, really gross. Anyway, you want to know why it didn't happen to you right - simple really, I took a lot of air from Ravnica and held it while we were travelling through the Eternities, just like I'm doing now. I had it wrapped around the two of you and me while I was restructuring Ilyonde, you were safe."

"Uh, thank you," slightly wrong-footed by the sudden answer Jace was left to block out Chandras' sniggering as he went on, "so, where will you go now?"

"On; I've got other places to make and plenty of work to do; I've got clones making the stars and suchlike but for the planes themselves I have to be there in person. Try to channel that much mana through them they'll burst like grapes."

"Nasty," Chandra commented before the speaking in a softer voice, "but what about you though, you don't do this all the time surely - you looked half-dead when you were done on Ilyonde."

"I've always healed fast; anyway, brace for landing, we're about to arrive and whatever you do don't look behind you until we do."

It was instinctive, it was uncontrollable and it was the scariest thing either of them had ever done; just as they were pulled out of the mists both planeswalkers caught a glimpse, just the meanest sight of something else, something truly gargantuan moving through the fog of the Eternities, following them as a whale might a fishing vessel. It was an impossible nightmare from beyond space and time and it was the last thing they saw before there were cobbles under their feet and the unreal was sealed away, a sight that would haunt them both for a long time as Naruto squinted up at the signs above then,

"Tin street? Jace-san are we in the right place?"

"Uh," forcing the image of the otherworldly being from his mind the Ravnican glanced around and remembered his way through the city, grateful it was dark and the Azorius weren't out in force, "this way, follow me."

Naruto, citing good manners, accompanied them to the door but declined Jaces' invitation over the threshold,

"Sorry, no rest for the wicked," he apologised before looking thoughtful, "there was something else I was going to tell you but… ah, it's probably not important. Anyway I'm sure we'll meet again; watch the skies, if you see other stars it means I'm doing my job right."

"I've always wanted to dabble in astronomy," Jace admitted before glancing down at the diminutive planesmaker, "well Naruto it's been… interesting."

"That's one word for it; try and keep yourselves out of trouble, hard as it might be for one of you," Chandra just shrugged before, to the surprise of the other two, her expression softened,

"Mind if I ask you something Naruto?"

"Please do."

"You've told us about the past, all about the end and what happened, and the part we played in making it happen; what about you?" She pushed on before she lost her courage; she had all his attention his now and, even normal, his eyes seemed so much older than a childs' should, "What was it like before your spark lit?" There was no denying it this time; even in the semi-darkness his eyes were hooded, his formerly-smiling face stony; Chandra knew she'd taken a gamble but his explanation following the revelations of the Eye's aftermath had helped turn a sharp knife aimed at her heart. Few sparks ignited for holistic reasons; she only knew of one planeswalker with that advantage and he was, or had been, an order-obsessed moron last she'd checked; and she'd thought Naruto likely the same, something his answer of,

"Another time perhaps, I'm afraid I'm running late," only made a certainty in her mind. With a last bow he departed, wisps of power around him as he 'walked away, leaving the two alone in the doorway of a Ravnican townhouse.

Jace didn't remember inviting the woman in but she was sat at his table regardless, looking up at him as he shut the door and looked back. Neither said a word, what could they say; more than once both opened their mouths as though ready to break the billowing silence but nothing came - only when Chandra clenched her gauntlet in front of her and began gently thumping her forehead off it was there any noise,

"My sentiments exactly," Jace agreed, chuckling as she glanced at him sidelong,

"Two planes Beleren, we found one first thing and were then dragged to another after being humiliated - even that feels like weeks ago!"

"Yes, finding the truth of the Multiverse and how we played a part in almost destroying it tends to bury titbits like that," the aqua mage agreed, slumping into a chair opposite her, "gods I need a drink."

"You have booze here?"

"Mostly wine but there should be some ale about; I take it you want a glass?"

"Jace Beleren give me enough alcohol to get me drunk and I will steal every volume, encyclopaedia and research paper from the guild of your choice and deliver them to you *by hand* !"

Jace stared across the table before for the first time since Chandra had known him he threw his head back and roared with laughter. She was stunned, even singeing the end of a finger to make sure she wasn't dreaming but as the mind-mage's convulsions eventually stilled and he wiped his eyes she couldn't help but chuckle herself,

"I would say no but remembering how difficult you were to track that's a tempting offer," he remarked, "the cellars' over here, how strong?"

"Melt my brain; gods above and below what the hell, just… what the hell?"

"I know," he agreed, sliding the bolt out of the cellar door with his foot, "someone akin to a god; regardless of what he says Naruto has the power to do or undo as he pleases; the mana he used was beyond anything else. I won't be long." He disappeared into the cellar and Chandra was left with her thoughts, trying to order some and forget others, especially the revelation of that monumentally stupid trip into Zendikar. *I should never have gone* ; it was so easy to say now, why hadn't she seen it then; *I should have forgotten that scroll, left the Purifying chamber and never looked back. But if I had I wouldn't be here now, would any of us be here now?* It was a question she couldn't answer, much like hundreds of others she had swirling in her mind - would Jace remove some of them for her? He'd done it before on business, maybe he could do it again if she asked nicely enough? The sound of boots on wood brought her back to the present and, more importantly, promises of sweet, alcohol-induced forgetfulness,

"Thought you were going for wine," she quipped as the back of Jace's robe appeared from the cellar, "What were you doing down there, pressing it?"

"No, I was making a discovery," he said, not turning as Chandra groaned,

"Dare I ask?" Jace's shoulders sagged before he slowly stumped around, a garish dye now staining the front of his aquamarine robes a bright yellow,

"I just discovered what Naruto meant to tell us before he left," the kitchen silence was shattered by raucous hysteria for the second time in a few minutes, Chandra almost falling out her seat at the sight of him and only able to hear his offer when she ran out of air to laugh with, "if you don't mind pre-paying your bar tab would you help de-trap my house?"

That was an experience of shared trauma; not only had two of the three traps from before reset (Jace had unpicked the clothes-stealing one, something Chandra recalled an instant after she'd stepped on its trigger and it mercifully failed to go off) but there were a multitude of other pranks each found maddening when they were hit by them and hilarious when the other was. A falling box of fake spiders made Chandra yell and stamp on them all in a manner that sorely tested Jace's bladder control and when a rug suddenly came to life and wrapped the memory adept up it was several minutes before she was composed enough to unravel him. A mirror in the hallway made the firebrand double-take and check her hair wasn't electric blue (Jace, on the other hand, thought white made him look rather distinguished) but the final indignity awaited in the library, Chandra quickly slamming the door and standing in front of it protectively,

"Ah, we should deal with that tomorrow." Jace looked like he was about to cry,

"How bad is it?"

"How much alcohol do you have?"

"As much as I need; just let me see the worst of it." She sized him up before stepping aside,

"Don't say I didn't warn you." The handle clicked and she nudged it with her heel, letting the door swing open; Jace looked in, looked around and then, with mounting horror, looked up. For a long time he was motionless and Chandra was afraid his mind had finally blown a fuse before, at length, he spoke in a reedy, high-pitched squeak,

"He's been, thorough."

"That's one word for it," Chandra agreed, wondering how much glue the planesmaker had gone through to secure everything to the ceiling; even the ink-pot on the perpendicular table was where it should be with the quill still in it, "drink?" Jace nodded, pulling the library door shut with a soft but very final slam,

"Drink."

Company loved misery but somehow the first few bottles burnt the bitter edge off the night; by halfway through the third they were joking and laughing about some of the surprises Naruto had left for them,

"You should keep that mirror," Chandra advised, nodding self-importantly, "real eye-opener, made me look twice."

"I'd look twice at you with blue hair," Jace assured her, fumbling for a refill, "jus' like you'd look at me with yellow robes. Hope this dye washes out, an' I needed to reorganise the library anyway."

"Jus' as well," she assured him, holding out her glass for the mind-mage to refill, "hey, don't leave me gasping." Jace, however, didn't top her up immediately, instead he looked at her as piercingly as a man several goblets south of sober could,

"Chandra, why did you ask Naruto about before his spark caught light?"

"Umm, why not? He's young for a 'walker, or 'maker," she pointed out reasonably, "an' did you see his face, I don' think it was good."

"Me either, not good; I was lucky, didn't realise when my spark lit."

"What?" Chandra was honestly surprised, "How's that?"

"Master of mine, said it was a spell that backfired," Jace admitted, his expression becoming more drawn as he remembered those memories of his past he hadn't excised, "he was planning, well, don't know, but he kept me from knowing about the spark an' what happened, I found out by accident."

"What did you do?" He looked away,

"I can't remember, I made myself not remember so nothing good; came here and stayed ever since. Not the best, not the worst but people won't leave me be."

"'Cause you're telepet, uh, telespo… you speak in people's heads?"

"'Xactly, an' it's even worse 'cause I can 'walk; who wouldn't want that? I could look into the minds of kings, leaders on lotsa planes; that's why I was in the Contosium, that was a mistake."

"The what?" Jace shook his head as though bothered by flies,

"No, not sayin' 'bout that, we were talking about sparks - how did yours light?"

"Mine? Oh," even if the Purifying Fire had let her lay those ghosts to rest it wasn't a story she liked telling, "mine wasn't good." Jace nodded, understanding in his eyes as he offered the bottle,

"Sorry; you don't have to…"

"No, you were honest; I can't remember where I'm from…"

They talked for a long time of many things; sadness, joy, narrow escapes, crazy adventures, battles won and loves lost. Night had truly fallen but as she glanced out the window a sudden thought flashed over Chandra's mind, making her smile,

"What's so funny?" She pointed towards the dark sky,

"You think he's out there now, making more stars?"

"Probably, we'll see him again," the mind mage assured her, "an' next time I'll take notes. For now though he can work alone; I've got to sleep and if he's left a trap in my bedroom I, I'll, do something next time I see him."

"Yeah right," Chandra stood, stumbled and caught herself on the table edge, "what's that inn called again, is it six streets down and two over?"

"Inn? No," Jace shook his head at the state of her, "you'd not get ten paces 'fore the Azors got you, drunk an' disorderly an' that's if you're lucky. Got a guest room, you can use that."

"Really?"

"Yeah," only when he saw unadulterated shock on the firebrands' face did he hazily remember a roof over her head she didn't have to pay for was likely a rare thing, "I'd only have to bail you out the Boros jails in the morning otherwise."

"Thanks," and she was grateful, following in his footsteps as he led her up the stairs and along, "none of your minions are coming in are they?"

"No, I call when I need them, usually when I'm 'walking," he assured her, counting off the doors, "three, four… wait, what? Oh," he waved a hand, oceanic mana flickering over it erratically and the door he

was stood in front of shimmered and disappeared, revealing a blank wall, "missed that one." Chandra grinned, shoulders shaking as he opened the next door along,

"Not the biggest."

"It's fine," she assured him, stepping inside as the bed began to sing a lullaby she couldn't resist, "thanks, I mean it."

"Don't worry, see you in the morning." She made a noise that could have meant anything, the wine in her belly and dreams in her head combining to draw her towards the pillows. She remembered sitting on the beds' edge, kicking her boots off, falling backwards onto softness and, after that, nothing.

She's gone .

He shouldn't have been surprised and wasn't, not really; as he looked at the shoddily-made bed what did surprise him was the slight pang in his chest - would saying goodbye have killed her? *But she wouldn't be Chandra if she did* ; she was wild, reckless and impulsive like the mana she used and even for fire her flame burnt quickly. Making a mental note to tidy the room up when his hangover was gone Jace turned away, looking to hunt down some breakfast as the; *ramen, if that's how you pronounce it?* ; from yesterday wasn't keeping him full any longer. He had a hand on the banister and one foot dangling over the top step when a sudden thump made him pause; *the library? No chance* ; he didn't realise he was smiling until he heard the unladylike language from within, gently nudging the wooden portal open to see a familiar back.

Some would have called it determination, others hard-headedness but whatever it was he had to admire it. Chandra had somehow levered his chair off the ceiling first and was now stood atop it, retrieving stacks of the upside-down books from their shelves. She was faced slightly away from him as he leant on the doorframe, trying hard to keep his face straight as she carefully ripped the books

from their unnatural perches, greasing the wheels with profanity as she read their spines upside down. With a decent armful she slowly stepped down, feeling around with one foot first to prevent herself tumbling backwards; Jace waited until she had both boots under her before breaking the silence,

"Thought you'd already gone?" The pile of tomes swayed but didn't topple as the red-aligned planeswalker jumped,

"Son of a bitch Jace, knock next time! How long have you been there?"

"Not a minute, I honestly did think you'd left; what are you doing?" Chandra looked away, the ledgers in her arms rustling as she shifted uncomfortably,

"Trying to find a denouement in here" she mumbled, glowering as Jace snickered,

"Do you even know what a denouement is?"

"No and don't tell me; I'll find one myself."

"Fine, fine but how about you continue your search after something to eat," that made her prick her ears, "I can start clearing this place out while we turn it upside-down again." Placing her pile with the others she'd taken off the now half-bared bookshelf the pyromancer snorted,

"It's already upside down."

"Yes, so if we turn it upside-down again it'll be right side up."

"Stop, it's too early for mind-mage logic," Chandra demanded, straightening up and brushing herself down, "right, breakfast then we get this done."

Even with a decent meal, Jace being a reasonable chef and Chandra negating the need for coal, it took most of the morning

before the last ledger was back in its proper place and Jace wiped his brow, looking at the reasonable pile of old texts he'd winnowed from the flock,

"All yours; I'm sure you're itching to burn something." The red mage grinned,

"You know me too well; come on, I'll start it in the kitchen, save your servants filling the coal scuttle up. Stand me one more meal and then I'd best be going."

"Fair enough, never let it be said I don't pay the hired help," she shot him a rude gesture even if his tone was joking, "where will you go?"

"Uuh, not sure," she admitted before brightening, "I want to see how much more Naruto's made but I've got no idea where to look. I'll just travel and sense 'til I find something."

"Not the worst idea," Jace agreed before being struck by a sudden thought and following it quickly, "and you'd likely be the first there, no-one else knows what to look for. Listen Chandra, I know we've poor history but I'll make you a deal; whatever you find make a note of it and bring it back here, there'll be a bed and warm meal for you." She was stunned, too shocked to be angry as she regarded him agape,

"What - why the hell…?"

"Because it makes perfect sense," Jace went on, surprising even himself with his spur-of-the-moment plan, "I'm as excited about the planesmaker as you are but I can't be away from Ravnica for too long, the politics change too often to forgive a long 'walk. If you want to go exploring fine but don't let your discoveries go to waste; I can catalogue them and, if you want, Ravnica can act as a base for your expeditions; you can buy, or steal, if you have to, anything you need and I'm sure a few of the spells I've collected would be useful for you to know. It's fair as I see it, what about you?"

Chandra said nothing for a long time, probably the longest time Jace had ever seen her quiet and for good reason - she valued freedom above all things and an offer like this, even for mutual benefit, would be scrutinised as a potential cage. Jace did nothing that might affect her decision until a flash of inspiration crossed his mind,

"In any case you'll need somewhere to be while you're raiding the Izzet; I doubt you can carry the whole guild here on your back." Thrown off completely by his wild tangent Chandra could only ask,

"What are you babbling about?"

"I remember a certain 'walker not a thousand leagues from here promising me a lot of research material in exchange for alcohol," he reminded her smugly, amused as her expression dropped, "I held up my end of the bargain, your turn; I choose the Izzet for you to ransack."

"But I, ah, no you didn't; do I look hung-over?" There was a feral cunning in her eye as she squared up to him, "Very nice wine but wasn't enough to get me drunk."

"Should have been, we went through enough of it; you've built up a tolerance?"

"A bit but it's mostly my mana," Chandra explained, conjuring a small fire on the end of her hair, "burns off the beer soon as I channel it, stops the red-eyes you've got going on." Having not checked a mirror that morning Jace felt the sting of that comment and chambered his own in retaliation,

"A neat trick, though I imagine your hollow legs help; those thighs probably hold half a barrel each." Fortunately Jace realised he'd said the wrong thing just before the booted foot connected to one of the thighs he'd insulted swung for his vulnerables,

"Outside," Chandra's breath was smoking as she stared through him, "no smart-talking's saving you this time Jace, we're duelling!" He

thought for a way out of this before, suddenly, he stopped thinking; it had been a long time since he'd duelled properly and he was reasonably sure she wouldn't kill him,

"As you wish; follow me," serene blue clashed with flaring orange as he rose to her challenge, "I suppose you'll need the practise if you will throw yourself headlong into the unknown." She merely grinned, fire crackling up her arms as he led her into his manor ground, beckoning her to halt and marching on another score or so paces, eyes glowing as he faced her again,

"When you're ready…"

Fire roared and water hissed as it quenched it, the battle of mages and mana as old as the Multiverse begun anew as, far away, one who would see the return of something older than the Multiverse heard echoes of the fight and nodded to himself; *the biggest mistake corrected, some of the worst that could have happened unfulfilled and* ; he glanced at the new adornment he'd replaced about his shoulder after leaving Ravnica; *a way to make sure all this gets recorded for the right moment. It all seems to be going rather well…*

… so then ; his thoughts turned grimmer as he looked to the new burden over his shoulder, feeling it rustle and knowing exactly what his oldest friend meant; *time to shift focus a little. The Multiverse can wait a little - there are matters much closer to home I have to attend now…*

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 - Closing the Door…

To normal eyes it would seem like a scene played out a thousand times across a hundred worlds; a dreamy youth watching a sunset, scribbling here and there in a chained diary. The secrets of the heart, of love and other such things were locked within similar tomes the Multiverse over, the yearnings of youth recorded forever until either the pain faded of the joy of adulthood began. As the sun sank lower and the flitting of the fae-folk was seen in the blossoms nearby the young man stood, his volume rattling on its chain as he set his mind forwards, forbearance and foreboding both on his face,

"Time to end this," he said softly, readying himself for a terrible reunion, "first though," he gently patted the book at his hip and, albeit invisibly, the pages ruffled softly in response, "to deal with you…"

The noise came twice before Jace responded, so used to his wards triggering he barely recognised his own doorbell. Quickly donning a loose robe he rushed down the stairs, trying to think who could possibly be calling at this hour; *I've bribed the Azorius and paid the Golgari off until the next festival* ; his part-time lodger had helped with that no end, memories of her returning with a large handful of coins to 'cover her rent' enough to put monetary concerns aside for a good long while. Hoping it wasn't a Boros or, worse, Rakdos recruitment drive, the mind-mage gathered himself slightly before opening the door, glancing around before catching a flash of yellow below him,

"Naruto?" He said wonderingly before manners overcame awe, "Naruto; please, ah, come in." He stepped aside to usher the planesmaker in but, to his slight relief, the boy shook his head,

"Nah, no need; listen Jace-san I need a favour; I've got a bit of business to look into and I don't want this to get damaged," he slipped off his chain and held it forwards, the book swaying limply on its constraints, "could you look after it for a bit?"

That's new ; he hadn't had that the last time their paths had crossed but even as the memory crossed his mind the planesmakers' words came back to him, an echo that made his neck-hair stand on end; *I keep meaning to get a diary, write down how all this works…* ;

"Of, of course," the links were cool in his hands, Naruto's book a hefty tome as the ninja passed it over, "how long will you be?"

"Wish I could tell you, hopefully not long; if you want to you can read it but," Jace was doing a mental happy dance until the warning threw grease over the dance floor, "it's a bit touchy; you'll need words of powerful magic to get it open."

"I'll see what I can do," somehow even as his knuckles whitened on this priceless prize his voice was surprisingly level, "my thanks for your trust and your time Naruto." The boy chuckled,

"I should be thanking you, bloody annoyance that ledger can be sometimes," Jace heard the chain creak; *definitely magical, it responds to his voice* ; "have you seen Chandra-san about?" Distracted by the weight in his hand Jace had to think to bring the firebrand to mind,

"Not for a while, she flits in and out; hopefully she'll be back for the Guildpact festival," not a hope he'd have held some eight months ago, "you know of it, and will you be attending?"

"If I get time I might look in; anyway I've taken up enough of your night," the ninja bowed as he stepped away from the door, "sorry for looking in uninvited but this just came up. I'll leave you to it, see you in a while."

Even as the wisps of the departing planeswalker were dispersing Jace had slammed and double-locked the doors, eyes barely straying from the book in his hands as he raced headlong to his laboratory, spells already flickering across his mind as he just about blocked out the urge to cackle maniacally. The planesmakers' secrets had been given to him; with this, he would *know* the truth of how Naruto would undo the Blind Eternities and, more than that, lay to rest a great worry that had plagued him for some time. Crashing into his deepest research centre and not even bothering the lock the door behind him the mind mage placed the book carefully on the solid counter and, summoning his mana, began to examine it in detail.

The ground he touched upon following his 'walk was similar to that anywhere else within the Multiverse; similar but differentiated by one very pertinent fact - unlike the other planes, here was the one that had birthed him.

The memories were as bitter as he thought they might be; time, rather than dulling the pain, only seemed to have given it sharper venom. His chest ached both from within and without, pain to two kinds warring as he closed his eyes and breathed, searching for his centre as he battled the demons in his head. Sensing the mana of his home plane, one that to his knowledge had no name, he found it pliable enough, a little stodgy through lack of use; *so not many planeswalkers ever travel this way, I may even be the first* . The thought made him smile bitterly as opened his eyes and mind together, heeding the echoes around the world as he sought to undo the last idea before it could bear any more bitter fruit and bury a few ghosts of his own in the process.

Shortly afterwards reality rippled around him as he realised how truly dire the situation was for the unhappy world - too much was happening for even him to counter at once with any great ease. Quickly formulating a plan he stepped into the space between worlds, speeding to where two of his targets awaited with a wolfish

smile on his face. *I may have put this off too long* ; his eldest friend-stroke-annoyance had been right, not that he'd ever let him find out about it; *but I can still put it right. Just as well I dealt with the Phyrexians first* ; the weight of the artefacts he'd liberated from the world of metal clinked reassuringly under his clothing, allowing him to give a terrible smile; *a coffin's too good for this ghost* .

Only his familiarity with the leader of the Akatsuki allowed Sasuke to know they had company, withdrawing his blade with a whisper as he realised Tobi should have been at the wars' front line by now. He no longer cared about the war or anything else; all that mattered now was the truth and, even if he had to once more taste the devils' fruit, he would know it. He heard but ignored Karin's gasp as the four shades the resurrected Snake sannin had summoned from ashes and sacrifice took form, instead focussing on the figure now in the doorway of the Uzumaki shrine. His bloodline limit swirled in his eyes as he took in the newcomer, then they widened as they took in the face, older now but still the same one he'd seen vanish in lightning over three years before, the Mangekyo failing to appear as, rather than rage at the Uzumaki's death, he'd been left with only confusion,

"Dobe," the whisper echoed in the still chamber, the very air seeming to ripple as everyone focussed on the new presence. All was still until a sibilant hissing filled the air,

"Kukukuku," Orochimaru laughed, regarding the reunion with amusement; *especially since, thanks to me, he can see his dear father again* ; "Naruto-kun, it seems rumours of your dea…"

" *Chinmoku!* "

The Snake sannin gagged, clutching at his throat as something white shone in Naruto's hand, his eyes narrowed into slits of pure loathing as he stepped forwards. Something preceded him, something stronger than even killing intent as the rest of Taka backed away; the walls cracked, the entire shrine shaking as the Uzumaki's fury leaked at the sight of the man who'd murdered his adoptive grandfather;

and then brought him back. This ends now you snake, now and eternally! ;

"On," his voice was soft, "your," soft but deadly with laden promise, " *knees!* " Most of Taka were already there or lower, only the Hokages almost unaffected as with a crack Orochimaru caved, his joints giving way under a tsunami of pressure as Naruto focussed upon him alone. The former jinchuuriki regarded him impassively before he reached under his travelling cloak and something silver was sent spinning into the back wall, something that grew into a thick circle of metal,

"What…?" Sasuke's croak was ended as his former team mate intoned,

" *Nemurenai no ketsugo* " and a fog of black and silver engulfed him. That the Uchiha was able to even flap at the oncoming chakra cloud was a testament to his strength, strength that was ultimately futile as a sudden crushing weight around his neck and shoulders dropped him to his front. Glancing up unable to speak, he could only watch as five streamers of colour erupted from Naruto's fingers, each one hitting the silver disc hovering behind the kneeling sannin, a disc that soon reacted to this power. Symbols lit up, tracing around the edges as slowly the middle opened, yawning wider and wider into a pit of ultimate blackness, Orochimaru not able to look as his doom as Naruto spoke, his voice laden with dire promise,

"Do you know what this is snake? Of course not," he stopped channelling his unheard of chakra and lashed out, grabbing the sannin by the neck and, unseen, channelling a sliver of black mana into his victim make sure he didn't squirm, "it is the *Mu e no tobira* . It is the end Orochimaru; every trace of you will be wiped from existence, every jutsu, every seal, every memory! You're going to die worm," he dragged the Otokage off the ground, relishing the terror he could see in the pale mans' eyes as his voice rose into a roar, "and no-one will remember you to mourn!"

He lashed out, his kick shattering the sannins' sternum as he flew backwards, at last able to scream as he fell into the void, the final door hungry for its tribute. The sannin seemed to linger for a long time, his face twisted, his chakra flaring as he tried everything to escape the grasp of nihilism but it was hopeless, his dreams of godhood would die for good this time…

… *who's dreams? Oh* ; seeing the portal sealing itself before him Naruto quickly realised the reason for his sudden lapse in memory; *guess that thing really does work, though I'll double-check with the book when I check in with Jace-san. Mental note, must get an idea how that plan's going when I've dealt with this* ;

"Naruto-kun," the voice, one he'd not heard for years, made him smile, the Third Hokage looking at him with blackened eyes as he held out a hand and willed the now-inert door into it, "what, ah, what did you just do?"

"Got rid of someone I truly hated," he replied, regarding the four hokages before him with respect as half a continent away the last scraps of what had once been a human being finished oozing into protoplasm, the loss of his stolen power rendering Kabuto unable to balance natural energy and killing him as surely as the planesmaker had killed his mentor, "can't remember what I hated him for or why but he or she's gone now regardless. However you are not and, much as I wish you weren't, I know all of you are dead - allow me to return you to the Pure World."

"Don't," it was the Second who spoke, his tone freezing the rest of team Taka, who had been going to Sasuke's aid; with the… well, whoever had summoned him gone, the Edo tensai still lingered but he was under no-one's control, "who are you boy?"

"Uzumaki Naruto Nidaime-sama…"

"Naruto," the Fourth exploded, rushing to seize his son by the shoulders, looking deep into his eyes, "I'm sorry I, I never thought I'd see you like this."

"Uh, likewise," somewhat perturbed, the Uzumaki genteelly disentangled himself from the mans' grip, "still, you give me a second and I'll send you back."

"Back? Why would I want to go back, I've just found you," Minato's face was one big beam, though it faded slightly at seeing his son confused, "you, know who I am right?"

"The Fourth Hokage, the Yellow Flash and the man who sealed a demon into me the night I was born," though it had been a decision for the best overall he was still a little bitter about it. That didn't seem to be the answer Minato was looking for however; Naruto winced at the grip on his shoulder as the Fourth slowly looked over his shoulder at his predecessor, killing intent once more suffusing the air,

"You swore he would know Sarutobi; you swore you'd tell him the truth!"

"I died before I could," the Third defended himself, though for the life; *unlife, in this case* ; of him he couldn't remember who had killed him in that rooftop fight, "I entrusted that to Jiraiya with my passing." Minato groaned, remembering his sensei all too well,

"No wonder you're in the dark then; okay Naruto, I'm sorry to say it like this but, I'm your father."

If Minato had been expected tantrums, tears or a joyous hug he was sorely disappointed; unbeknownst to him Naruto had learned far more damaging truths about the nature of existence to be thrown off-course by a little thing like his parentage. Already half his mind was on the problem after this one, one he now had a good reason to flex a little muscle on before it ended badly, so he simply nodded and said,

"I see; that actually makes sense now I think about it, jinchuuriki are usually related to the village leaders. Listen, dad, I don't have time to hang around; something really big is happening and I've got to put a

stop to it before it gets out of control. I'm probably not what you thought I'd be but believe this; when you see mum on the other side I want you to tell her, and tell yourself, I'm grateful for what you did and you were not wrong to do it." He stepped back, aching inside but putting a brave face on it as he could see his father was doing, Minato swallowing hard even as he stepped back amid his peers,

"We, your mother and I, we will always be proud of you."

"Thanks," Naruto glanced at the assembled dead, each of the Hokages regarding him with curiosity or warmth as small glyphs appeared in front of him - he couldn't get bogged down in twenty-questions now, "go in peace, all of you - *chijo no ketsugo o kiru* ."

The small slivers of blue mana rushed forwards, each one hitting the forehead of a summoned village leader and undoing the binding that had called them forth. Naruto's last glimpse of his father and adopted grandfather showed them smiling kindly before ashes fell and spent kunai clattered to the ground, the Edo Tensai undone as he took a deep breath, holding his rage in until it could be aimed at a proper target. He paused for a second before turning away, mana building within him and only just refraining from lashing out at the feeble whisper from his side as he stepped forth,

"Uzumaki…"

"Shut up Uchiha," he didn't even glance at the man who'd tried to murder him, knowing if he did he'd likely kill his former best friend, "you wanted to sever your bonds, congratulations, you did it. Live, die, be farmed for your bloodline I don't care; you are nothing and are as nothing to me anymore. The dobe has walked past you Sasuke, and he will never look back."

With that he pulled on the mana around him, abandoning the heartless husk who'd once been his team mate and whisking himself across the Nations towards the true fight, determined to end the madness and see all undone as required.

Unfortunately, this time, he arrived a second too late.

She'd closed her eyes at the light and hoped dying won't hurt; to her surprise it hadn't, the roaring in her ears suddenly becoming utterly silent as the worry, the pain and the screams of the injured stopped. The war was over, they had surely lost but it seemed so remote and far away - she had played her part, done what she could but the end was truly never in doubt. The Nations had been divided until the end, the Akatsuki under the radar until their task was mostly done and they were confident enough to emerge as the threat to the shinobi system. Their forces had been formidable and their leaders unassailable, even their second in command able to take down the great Jiraiya-sama, a blow her mentor had never recovered from. *Still, it doesn't matter now* ; ever since she'd seen that terrible plant sprout in the distance, alive with energy she could all but taste on the air and the twin terrible figures overseeing its rebirth she'd known it was a losing battle but had fought because it was what she'd been taught to do, let the Will of Fire burn even when hope was extinguished; *I've played my part. I wonder if tou- and kaa-san are here?* The light faded, she had a brief second of looking at the back of her eyelids and then Haruno Sakura opened her eyes, looking up at the darkening sky.

It looked a lot like the Nations, thought it smelt somehow, cleaner; shaking her head to knock loose a slight headache, she half-levered herself into a sitting position and accepted the hand offered before looking up to see who offered it and freezing,

"Naruto?" The boy who'd been dead for four years smiled and she smiled back - somehow it seemed right he'd be the first to welcome her to the next life,

"Hello Sakura-chan, still as beautiful as ever." She almost bopped him on the head out of reflex,

"Don't say things like that," she scolded, "so, what happens now?"

"Now? You and the others get behind me," Naruto wasn't smiling any more, he was looking behind her as she belatedly noticed others, the rest of the shinobi alliance picking themselves up, wondering what was going on, "I'll deal with this."

"Thi…?" The words shrivelled to dust in her throat as she realised she wasn't dead; she was still in the Elemental Nations, still in hell as the assembled Akatsuki force stared down at her, their doomsday weapon in the far background behind a legion of troops. Glancing about her frantically the med-nin spotted familiar faces and rushed to them, helping Shizune to her feet as she shouted,

"Naruto what happened?"

"The long white tunnel sometimes leads back to the light Sakura-chan," he called back, raising one hand, "you and the others stay there; this is my responsibility now." His hand glowed with chakra; she tried to step after him only to be rebuffed, the air itself solidified. Beating her fists against it did no good, doton was useless and so was the angry tear that leaked from her eye as she saw him advance; as before, so again she was left in the shadow of a boy who had supposedly died by the strength of a promise to her.

"The Kyuubi jinchuuriki - I believed he was dead?"

"As did I Madara-sama; after the valley of the end Zetsu could find no trace even with your will," Obito said appealingly, seeking to rectify this error at once; the Juubi was almost complete from the chakra of that corrupted monk and the resurrected Gold and Silver brothers but the real beast would surely see the Moons' Eye Plan succeed, "they must have hidden him for training."

"If so they play their ace too late," the reanimated legend announced, swirling Sharinghan fixed on the distant figure, "have the others capture him, we'll bind him here and then see to my true rebirth."

"At once Madara-sama," the masked shinobi had his finger to his ear already, "it will be done."

Stepping forwards Naruto surveyed his foes, the ranks of the white alien men interesting due to the mana they possessed, a curious blend that mimicked but was very different to that nature mages commonly used. He mused on this for a while before a figure landed before him, tall and with numerous piercings, concealed beneath a large black cloak decorated with red clouds; *the ones responsible for this* ;

"You are the Kyuubi jinchuuriki?"

"Until recently," Naruto confirmed, "who are you and what is the reason for this war?"

"I am God"; *yep, really glad I didn't let that title stick - it does make you sound like a pompous ass* ; "and I am teaching the world Pain." Content his barrier would block out interruption from both sides the former jinchuuriki braced himself,

"Okay, how - short version, I don't need earache."

"The weapon has been created; once used it will show…"

"Forget it; *yochi noryoku*," a string of blue mana connected his mind with that of his opponent, snapping a second later at the ground around Naruto's feet split open, his grip on a building rage slipping,

"Get the rest," he grated, as sickened by the Akatsuki's crimes on this level as he had been with Bolas's on another and as resolved to see them properly punished, "all the Akatsuki, get them here so I can deal with you all."

"You are…" The path of Pain had to leap aside quickly, a flash of lighting earthing into the ground just before it,

"Now!" It said no more, instead biting its thumb and the slamming it into the ground, five other figures emerging from the smoke. Naruto faced them all without flinching, counting off the figures he'd seen in the would-be leaders' mind and adding two more as with a swirl of paper and foreboding shadow the aerial threat of the terrorist organisation came to the battlefield,

"Hey, Pain-sama un," the Iwa bomber's clay creation hovered overhead, its rider shouting down, "what's stopping my art being shown?"

"The Kyuubi jinchuuriki has shown his hand," one of the corpses said, twelve eyes not moving from Naruto's impassive figure, "he is required to resurrect the Juubi."

"Ha, he doesn't look so tough, a waste of art," with a beat of wings the clay steed arrowed to the sky, Deidara's mouths already masticating handfuls of explosives, "he thinks he can handle the Akatsuki on his own? Ha, what a laugh." With that he let his attack fall, a flight of deadly doves diving on their target.

Ever since the whispers had come from the front line Hinata had been trying to block them out; Naruto-kun was dead, he had died at the hands of the Uchiha traitor and she had spent the last four years training to avenge him. She was peerless within the clan, even Neji acknowledging her as his superior and her rank as ANBU captain gave weight to her skills. Since the shaky alliance had been formed she'd been one of its lynchpins, raiding Akatsuki supplies and harassing their commanders when she could until this, the endgame of their enemy's' strategy. She had thought she'd died but must have been knocked out by the blast of the bijuu monster; now her dead loves' name was on everyones' lips but she didn't heed them, trusting her eyes to see through the shimmering barrier between their forces and those of the enemies. She recognised one of the alpha targets move to engage the stranger before her, saw his chakra dig into the earth…

… and the earth responded.

As screams and oaths filled her ears Hyuuga Hinata was glad of one thing; whoever this stranger was he was not her Naruto-kun, he was a kami sent to aid them. No-one, not even the Second or even First Hokage could have done as he did, the hurricane swirling in front the alliance seemingly so close she could reach out and touch it but the barrier held firm, shielding them from the divine fury of the wind. Even the Byakugan couldn't pierce the storms' might but the ANBU didn't mind that - as she watched natures' fury levitate, held above the now-stripped ground to show the angelic being who had summoned it standing untouched in its eye she knew her villages' enemy would fall.

"Yes, I believe I can take the Akatsuki out on my own," Naruto commented, not even blinking after commanding his conjured hurricane away from the earth that had birthed it; the lack of mana from the ground would soon make it destabilise but it had caught the bomber and the paper-woman, that was enough. It wouldn't kill them though; they would pay for their crimes in full before he let any of these bastards die - with a pop a shadow clone appeared behind him, looking as grim as its maker as he stepped back,

"Make sure the organ-grinders don't try anything, I'll handle the peanut gallery," he whispered before facing Pain again, "well, where is the rest of your merry band? Better hope they get here soon Pain; origami doesn't survive a storm well last I checked."

The paths, anchored to the ground by the rods channelling chakra into them, leapt into the attack, Naruto keeping his senses open to the other reservoirs of chakra heading his way, a faint sheen of blue mana over his eyes as he prepared himself, firstly by swirling out the way of a burst of flame,

"That'll be Kakazu then," he muttered to himself as he fended off the attentions of some of the paths, though he let the Human path grab him just to see the look on its face when his spell beat its to the

draw, the black mana it had absorbed in place of his soul rotting its flesh like a plague, "hmm, time to thin the numbers out; *eko hokai*," his spell duplicated the effect the Human path was suffering from, the paths sharing a common soul and ravaged by his curse, knocking Pain out of the fight for the moment. His enhanced senses caught the rattle of chain and he caught the handle of a scythe aimed at his head just as a greatsword disembowelled him. Kisame grinned viciously only to back off stunned as the boys' body rematerialised, stitching itself at the waist as he flipped the swordsman off,

"Dodging is overrated, and you, *juko* ; let's see you bite with clenched teeth." The white mana raced up the shaft of the weapon, forming a gilded cage around the face of the maniacal priest that cut his ravings short. His partner chuckled at his plight as Kisame fell back, the diseased paths of Pain still recovering as Naruto casually leant to the side, dodging a senbon glistening with poison,

"Impressive," the hunched figure growled, advancing with a mechanical clanking noise, "when this is over I'll have your pelt for a puppet Kyuubi, if it remains whole enough."

"Uh huh; *uchikudaku*," the laugh was cut off by a flare of red, Sasori blown apart with no way to counter the attack that destroyed his favourite puppet, "so, two over there with the big ugly thing, two spinning overhead, three here with a load of corpses and a shed load of those white critters - and there I was wanting a challenge. Right," the Uzumaki bounced on the balls of his feet, realising he had a few minutes to burn before the storm overhead faded, "bring it."

Hidan was first, screaming and swinging his scythe even if the enchantment over his face prevented him ever connecting with anything, the rest using the diversion to their advantage to launch attacks on the jinchuuriki. Outside their normal pairings however the Akatsuki had a slight problem with crossing wires, something Naruto had no issue exploiting to the full as he casually ran through his options; *I could just annihilate everything but that won't bring anyone*

back, don't really want to summon anything unless I have to and clones are… actually they're perfect ;

"Kage bunshin," the odds were even, each Akatsuki fighting their own Uzumaki; as the original squared off against the mostly-recovered Pain, the rest began dancing with foes of their own.

Kakazu was one of the oldest shinobi in the world; he had lifetimes of experience, combination techniques most nin could only dream of and a defence proof against even the strongest attacks. He had earned his S-rank in his youth and held it for longer than most ninja lived but now, even with his five hearts, he was no closer to touching even this clone of his true opponent. The boy's expression never changed, almost as eerie as that of their leader as he wove and dodged through the majority of the ex-Taki nin's offence as though it had been preordained. Only occasionally did the boy offer a technique back and they were always in defence, an occasional wall of earth or sheet of water to block the right technique, nothing more. Temper rising, Kakazu bound three of his hearts to himself and switched to a longer-range mode,

"Fight back," he demanded, a wind and fire technique scorching the earth black but leaving the clone untouched as he shunshinned out the way,

"Why bother?" It responded, running from one of the hearts that had tried to hover in behind it, "You'll run out sooner than I will." Kakazu chuckled darkly,

"You overestimate yourself boy; I've been a ninja longer than your bloodline's existed."

"I know, you're slowing down old man," it shot back, "they say the minds' the first thing to go, it must be true if you haven't noticed yet." The treasurer didn't reply, instead moving to close range and trying to break the construct with his fists and needle-point threads but clone denied him that, dancing away and avoiding the fight; *so he's a*

distraction then? Fine ; Kakazu played by no rules but his own and aimed his left hand at another battle, chambering his lightning heart; *let's see him stop this… wait, what jutsu was I going to use?*

His hand remained stationary, the missing-nin thinking furiously but his mind had gone suddenly blank,

"Finally noticed have you?" The comment made him snap around snarling, though the clone seemed oblivious to his ire, "five hearts, only one brain and an old one at that. *Memori shinshoku*, nasty little enchantment that erases some of your experience every time you mould chakra - didn't you wonder why you were using more jutsu than normal? You've forgotten your favourites; pretty soon you'll be down to just the Academy three but I'm bored already," the clone smiled as for the first time Kakazu stepped back a pace, realising how large the gaps in his memory were now he focussed on something other than destruction; *raiton gone but for D-ranks, suiton only area-effect techniques and gunshot and, how do I dispel this genjutsu?! I can't remember how to break out!* ;

"Whatever you're thinking," the shadow clone dodged a last few techniques spat his way out of spite, letting a few globs of mud pass through his chest as the mana of the earth fortified him against its destruction, the shock making Kakazu make the fatal mistake of meeting his eyes, "forget it - *kangaerarenai o kaimamiru* ."

Under the gaze of the Butcher of Truth no mortal mind could persist; Kakazu's screaming was horrible to hear but the clone was in no mood to quiet it, letting the Taki-nin scream until his vocal chords shredded as long as he didn't expire - even mad, he had his purpose.

In all honesty he might have felt more sympathy for his opponent if he hadn't been a raging, frothing psychopath, and even though he was he could still feel a slight bit of pity for his circumstances. Hidan, as he'd gleaned from the man's teammates, not wanting to link to a mind that twisted unless he had to, was formerly of the land of Hot

Water and had converted to his mad religion following the disbanding of its ninja village. He truly had no idea what he was getting into or what the cost of his powers would be but Naruto didn't care much about that; *you made your bed, now you lie in it, though perhaps I can make it more comfortable* ;

"You seem a little annoyed Hidan-san," he remarked, casually swaying away from slashes of that terrible scythe despite his enchantment negating it entirely,

"Stand still and *die!* The insane Jashinist bellowed, his weapon spinning crazily as he tried to hem his enemy in,

"Not a chance; anyway, listen Hidan you've had a hard life what with all the cutting and bleeding you've had to do so I'm going to make this easy," the bloodthirsty priest grinned as the clone drew closer, withdrawing a sharpened pike from his robe only to belatedly see another pale glow around the fist heading towards him; despite his hasty back-pedalling it was already too late, " *heiwa shugi* ."

The screams, the demands for slaughter and the memory of pain just floated away, a transcendent bliss infiltrating Hidan's maimed and mutilated soul. Holy weapon clattering to the floor the Jashinist forgot his former allegiance, purple eyes running with tears for his new and beautiful dream as his conqueror merely waited, checking all was going well and joining his brother in keeping an eye on those removed from the battle thus far.

"It has been a long time since anyone has seen my true body; allow me to introduce my favourite puppet. The Sandaime Kazekage, master of the Iron…"

" *Kyoretsuna parusu* ."

"You, my art is meant to be eternal! Very well, prepare for my greatest performance; with this technique I have conquered a…"

" *Konagona-arashi* - oh, you're a puppet too? Well, almost - that was anti-climatic. Ah well, that's why you shouldn't just rely on machines alone; you always need flesh and blood, of a sort, to back you up. Still, as long as your heart's in one piece I can still use you…"

So his sword protects him from mana-based attacks and is itself shrouded from damage ; Kisames' opponent figured this out while the shark-man grinned, engorged by the flickers of power Naruto fed him through his spells; *how very irritating* ;

"Heh, not so easy without your ninjutsu brat? Have to say you're one of the best at it I've seen, Samehada's never been so full. And you've got a blade," he'd seen a scabbard under the brat's cloak as the clone acrobatically evaded him, "afraid to test it with mine?"

"Nah, it's just that bad things happen when that sword gets drawn and, no offence, you're not worth them." Irked by this dismissal, the renegade swordsman spat water bullets to shepherd the clone into a strike that would have ruptured it but for a well-timed kawarimi as the silent Uzumaki gave an idea some more thought; *an effective combination - he gets stronger with every attack I throw at him. Summons would be the answer but for the obvious problem - there must be a limit to how much power he can store. So how - duh* ; the solution was so simple he would have kicked himself had Kisame not been aiming to do the same thing, his sword giggling grotesquely; *when it doubt, go green - shi ni taeru!*

Contrary to his gleeful laughs Kisame was not enjoying this fight - keeping an eye on those around him had kept him alive more than once since he'd renounced ties with Kiri and might do so again as he saw Sasori little more than a graveyard of parts and Hidan trapped in some dream-world, oblivious to all around him. Whatever his village had done to the Kyuubi had made him formidable and Kisame wasn't going to chance his arm; as soon as he took out this clone he was leaving, hang the Akatsuki. *Still, no need to kill, just distract enough to break off* ; with that in mind the Monster of the Mist summoned his chakra, preparing a wave big enough to drown this nuisance and all

those behind him following his latest overhead chop. He never saw the slight sheen of verdant under the brats' sandals but he felt it, Samehada rattling as though he'd swung it against a rock as the clone, unperturbed by the blow that would have split a mountain in half, stepped forwards, hands crimson. Kisame felt two small hands grip his wrists and his skin grew warm; he didn't realise how bad the damage was until the stink of seared flesh reached him and he screamed,

"Only one way to cook a shark," Naruto said, his grip turning the swordsmans' forearms to charred meat and blackened bone, bone he duly snapped just to be sure he couldn't come back, "very, very well, seriously you carry some pretty nasty parasites. So, don't go anywhere," a kick to the side of Kisame's knee sorted that problem, the half-sharks' sword falling to the ground as he no longer had the muscles to lift it; *which reminds me* ;

"Try anything," Naruto addressed the fallen blade suspiciously, not trusting it's facade of inertness, "and you'll get worse than he did." The scales of the sword shivered in response and, satisfied, he slugged the Mist-nin in the jaw hard enough to knock him mostly senseless, the last of the Akatsuki to fall as his creator finished his own opponent.

"So then oh mighty one, I'm waiting," cruelty wasn't part of Naruto's usual repertoire but what the necromancer in front of him had done, and had others do in his name, was beyond redemption, "strike me down, undo my puny techniques, should be easy for a divine being like you. Unless you don't care of course," even in the dead-flesh of the corpses he could see the ire of his opponent, something he traded on to gather the mana he needed, "and for the best I suppose; what use is an angel as weak as yours, surely it'll teach your next herald not to be so useless."

"Die Kyuubi," the rain of missiles the Rin'nigan user threw at him was quite impressive but, at the same time, hopelessly futile, each one cancelled out by a flicker of flame he blew at the six together, forcing

them apart. A thundering drew his attention quickly and he diverted a sliver of mana from his preparations to deal with the oncoming threat. Pain's summoned rhino collapsed, shorn off at the knees by a sword of utter blackness as Naruto smiled wanly; none of the bodies were pressing him, fearful of what had happened last time. *Hang back, come forwards, it all mute to me* ; the ascended ninja thought to himself, already determining the best way to get the puppet-master to show himself; *your time is up Pain* .

His *hametsu no ha* split apart, thin streamers of darkness forming a shape before him like that of a pentagram, the space quickly filled by the remaining black mana he'd summoned as he placed his hand in the middle of it, the potent spell spinning in his hand like a shuriken as he drew it back. Pain's team regrouped, the fattest one of them coming to the fore; *he must be resistant to mana somehow - never mind. I don't have to go through you* ; with a grunt of effort he cast the sorcery at his enemy, thinly amused as they scattered from it. *Run, run, run as fast as you can…* ; the black star suddenly exploded, the main part spinning into the one who's intended to take the hit with the other five sections flew after the other five bodies; *… you can't flee this, it's the end of your plan* .

He might have let it last longer but he saw no reason to; Akatsuki was never the true goal here but this bastard killing someone dear to him made it personal. Therefore it was with great satisfaction that he watched the black mana cut the chords between puppets and summoner, five of the bodies dropping dead and the sixth following suite quickly as, capitalising on its shock, he rushed forwards to fill its last sight with a set of metal knuckles, the *anbiru no ken* shattering its skull and whatever brains it had. So, his enemy was defeated but not dead as he stooped and put a hand on the bodies' chest, scrying the leylines of power to its controller; *not yet anyway…*

"The jinchuuriki is somewhat skilled," Madara's voice never changed even as Tobi blinked, grateful for his mask as he watched his prized pawns taken down by a mere child, "they did well to hide him."

"They did; have you ever seen techniques like those Madara-sama?"

"No," his eyes had seen them though, so he knew them now, "it is to be expected though - though Hashirama and I are the strongest save the sage, I would have been more disappointed than I was with the kage that none had invented anything new since my death." Tobi nodded,

"They are unknown even to me; Konoha did a fair job honing their weapon; though speaking of your second coming I supposed it would be prudent to contact Pain now." Even as the masked man said this however, there was a plume of smoke on the battlefield before them and, even at this distance, the shape glimpsed as the smoke cleared and the swirling storm above faded away was unmistakeable,

"My pet threatens my eyes," for the first time there was a trice of fear in Madara's voice, one that his last clan member reacting instantly,

"Not for long"; reality began to warp, time and space blurring as the Sharinghan jutsu began to take effect.

A long way away whiskered cheeks creased in a malefic grin, the silver of blue mana released right when it mattered - one of the things Naruto had learned since his ascension that, though bigger was often better, timing was also a key.

"Ah," there was a sudden pain in his eye, Tobi clutching his mask as his technique failed, "what…?"

" *If I wanted you to move I'd have told you where you were going* ."

"What?"

" *In your head fool, you as well dead-man* "; the voice in his ear was dripping with scorn as, below, the clones of the jinchuuriki dragged or led their prisoners forwards, a two figures falling from the sky as the last of the twister dissipated, " *you want to live again Madara? You*

don't need Pain for that - I'll grant you that boon as soon as I'm done with your minions."

"You would bring me back, knowing I have the most powerful tailed beast under my whim?" The eldest Uchiha was musing, not concerned that the generals of his army were in his enemy's hand, "Why?" The mental voice faded for a moment before returning, darkness there that had been absent before,

" *My own reasons - now you can keep trying to save your organisation and having me stop you or you can stand on your little monster and watch, you might learn something* ."

It was a memory of before his supposed death that had Naruto finally unsling the sword he'd carried since he'd liberated a plane under a different, colder face, slamming it sheathed into the ground just in time for a falling figure to land gracefully on its rounded pommel. There was a sickening crunch as spine met steel and was found weaker, Pain in his throne bellowed in wrathful sorrow as he saw his only friend tortured, his ravings only increasing as Naruto grabbed the kunoichi by the neck, hauling her upright,

"As you have taken so you shall restore," there was no mercy in his expression, the fingers of his right hand inky black as he drew it back, "one of the living for one of the dead - *gisei no suri!* ." Pains' scream as he slammed his attack into Konan's heart was gut-churning, though as Naruto let the corpse drop even they were choked off a little by wonder as, rather than fall, the dead kunoichi began to change. Fed by memories he'd seen in the Rin'negan users' brain the Akatsuki member grew in height, gained hips and hair and her skin darkened fractionally, the nine-tails jinchuuriki whipping out an arm to stop his former counterpart collapsing,

"Ooohh," the Kumo kunoichi, newly restored by the exchange of souls, shuffled against him before gradually regaining her feet, "what happened?"

"Welcome back Yugito-san; please go and stand over there behind me, the others," Naruto nodded, the rest of his clones approaching the ninja they'd bested with the same spell at their fingertips, only Pain left alone with his tears as he watched all he'd longed for torn apart by this child, "will be with us shortly."

He was as good as his word, the rest of the jinchuuriki were returned from the Pure world by the deaths of their killers, the ebon mana making the transition possible. His kage bunshin helping the resurrected jinchuuriki, now free to lead peaceful lives without their beasts, the spark-bearing ninja stepped towards the Rin'negan user as Pain watched him come, hatred trembling in every contour of his emaciated frame,

"You killed our master," Naruto said coldly, allowing the supposed god no time to respond as he stood before his throne and raised his hand, "and with your death I bring him back. Konan waits for you on the other side; this isn't your world any more." Whether she did or not he didn't know or care but it seemed to make the gods' passing easier, the planesmaker catching the falling form of his godfather a few seconds' later and grunting under the weight,

"Damn it Ero-sennin, would a dry month kill you?"

"Huh?" As his senses slowly returned the Toad Sage tried to push himself away from whatever had him; his last memories were of Ame and his former students trying to kill him; *hang try, they did it. Am I…?* ; belatedly he saw a familiar face and his heart fell heavy,

"Naruto, I'm sorry I-oof! What was that for?"

"First because I'm getting really annoyed with people thinking they're dead just because they've seen me," his godson replied, having punched the taller man in the gut, "second because you never said who my father was and third to prove you're still alive," Naruto pointed out, though he cut off the celebrations before Jiraiya could truly get them going, "now get behind me with the others. I've still got work to do." Having glanced behind them Jiraiya had blanched and

made to argue but the look on his godson's face and a careful use of rebellious mana ended that idea, the Toad sage instead stepped backwards, towards the other gathered figures he belatedly recognised as the jinchuuriki the Akatsuki had caught and slain. *How are they here?* ; his network of spies had never failed before, he knew these people to be dead; *though, having said that I was too.* They saw him just as he did them but before any introductions could be made, or indeed before he could look towards the massed ranks of shinobi and ask why they were just standing there considering the threat before them all attention stopped, all thought ceased and all attention was drawn onto the form of his godson.

Alone before the god-like juubi and its immortal creators, Naruto began to sing.

The words were haunting but brief, each one fading from the mind like the last wisp of a candle as from the ground and sky power answered his prayer, luminous power twining with verdant strength under the lullaby of his words. He held his cupped hands forwards and the power flowed towards it as assuredly as water ran downhill, there was no force or coercion of this might. Still chanting his melodious verse Naruto drew his hands in, holding them just in front of his face before releasing them, the last syllables of his stanza fading as something beautiful was released, winging its way towards the distant figures like a dove. Though Madara held his gunbai ready he did not attack the summoned creature as it hovered before him, Tobi likewise enraptured by the otherworldly voice as the spell streaked into the open chest of the Uchiha progenitor.

Parchment flaked away, the ashes of the grave replaced by living flesh as Madara gasped, breathing for the first time in decades as he felt his war-fan, cold under his fingers. The sensation shocked him, then as he felt his blood thunder along his veins he threw back his head and laughed in triumph, his herald now regarding him in awe,

"Yes; now I have a beating heart and lightning nerves, this will be a battle."

" *No it won't*," the mental voice was cold in his ear, " *I used the fukkatsu no sanbika simply because I can't kill you if you're already dead. You have something that does not belong here Madara, you and your little boot-lick - I am here to return it from whence it came* ."

"You're a fool," Tobi spat, Madara nodding in agreement as he tested his new body, every sensation something to be savoured even before the fight began, "you would stand before the ten-tails? This is a god you foolish nin-gen, it will fill the hole of this world of hell!"

" *This world is far from the worst I've seen and it's not a god, it is an idea. Still, I'll play at your game*," there was a pulse of mana before the two Uchiha, the jinchuuriki tapping into his bijuu. They responded likewise, cells stolen from the First Hokage allowing them a measure of control over the avatar of the God-tree and control over the white Zetsu as one but no fox appeared, their Sharinghan useless and almost unable to look at the child now glowing with power, the ground around him spider webbing from the force, " *you should remember your mythology Uchiha. Before there were gods…* ," a spear, no a chain of mana flew up from his back, plunging into something far above them all, a hole that led to a cloying mist,

".. *there…* ," the Zetsu moved, charging against this threat as the chain stiffened,

." *..were…* ," the Juubi gathered its chakra, a black ball of destruction gathering before its many jaws as it obeyed the wills of the true sons of the Six Paths, those destined to rule the ninja world forever and unchallenged,

".. *titans! "*

The chain retracted, the hole gouged in reality suddenly split and the unknowable emerged; something impossible, something beyond human comprehension descended onto a new world and suddenly the Uchiha were very much challenged by a being beyond the legendary ten-tails, the first where theirs was fifth. The world stood still, the Zetsu stumbled to a halt, not a soul breathed or stirred, even

the two Naruto was mentally speaking with barely able to hear him over the utter unreality of what had just happened,

" *Guess it's my turn again - fine!"* There was an explosion of smoke and another army, equal to the Zetsu forces the Shinobi alliance hadn't killed off, stood before them, this one soon enhanced with green sage chakra as from somewhere before them one voice bellowed a single order,

"Annihilate!"

They came forwards and they did; empowered by the strength of the forests the clone army overran the former children of the tree, their monstrous overseer sweeping in their wake and lashing out with its multitude of tentacles. It never touched any of the Zetsu, anything that came close to the unreal being was reduced to grey dust that dispersed on the wind, whole swathes of the white humanoids destroyed by one swipe of the creatures' mass. However even seeing their army decimated and the monster bearing down on them both Madara and Obito were ninjas with decades of experienced, too wily to be caught by surprise and therefore even before the shunshin was finished a gunbai was aimed at the neck and a kusuri-gami sickle flashed for the guts of their attacker. The fans' edge met a sheathed blade, the sickle denied by a blue aura that shattered like glass under its sharp point as Naruto reached forwards, his true eyes blazing and shocking both his opponents as, hindered by their connection to the Juubi, they were unable to dodge. Obito engaged his ghost technique successfully, grinning as the hand passed through his throat before Naruto whispered,

" *Kage no sakeme*," and his fingers became intangible as well. Fire techniques were dispersed by a sheet of something else, something that swallowed it whole and then the world vanished, both Uchiha crying out in pain as they were ripped bodily from their monster and dragged into a different world.

Arriving sore, bludgeoned and battered after forever lost in a sightless fog they both stood in a strange place, one Tobi recognised,

"This is my dimension!"

"No, it is not," the answer came from atop one of the strange obelisks of this place, Naruto cratering another as he leapt down to join them, the ripples of his eyes swirling as he beheld the Uchiha contemptuously, "you Uchiha couldn't create something even this basic, you just destroy. Your monkey-eye just migrated you to a plane someone else half-built then abandoned when it awoke, a poor imitation of a true spark"; *though how you came by that ability is something I'd like to know - the sparks' not the only way to 'walk for sure but the Sharinghan shouldn't be strong enough* ;

"Who are you?" Madara was, for once, respectful but ready for battle, his own Rin'negan ready as the stranger stared him down,

"Uzumaki Naruto, son of the Fourth Hokage and onetime-jailor of the Kyuubi until some years ago, when another of your clan went mad and ran off. Now I'm here to deal with something else left behind in the Nations, something you two helped me with ironically enough - because you brought the Juubi together I'm not going to kill you."

"You sound like you could; this is my dimension boy," Tobi boasted, his bloodline spinning slowly, "we're free to go, you've trapped yourself."

"Have I'm now? You didn't bring us here Tobi, I did once I realised what your technique did," Naruto assured him, working through patterns in his mind as he slowly moulded what pitiful mana there was in this almost-dead plane, "and I did so for you to answer for your sins."

"I answer to no-one," Madara assured him, tensing as the boy channelled his unusual chakra again,

"No? I think it's more accurate to say," he intoned the incantation mentally, not looking down from either of the two Uchiha as he released his spell, "you answer to no-one *alive!* "

It had always seemed strange to him that the colours of mortal enemies, black and white, could be used to do the same thing, albeit in different ways. He supposed it was a matter of perspective as to which was more wholesome but in this case he only needed a glimpse, not to fully embody the dead as he had earlier. As the two spirits shimmered into view, one a young woman with marked cheeks, the other a slightly older, dark-haired man with bandages where his eyes should be, both living Uchiha stepped back as they realised who their opponent had summoned to face them,

"Kai, kai!" Tobi bellowed furiously, flaring his chakra to dispel the ghost, "What have you done?"

"Who's there?" Rin, or the ghost of Rin as she'd been just before the treacherous Kakashi had broken his promise had an echoing quality to her voice, but it was still definitely her as she looked around,

"Tell her Tobi," Naruto's demand was the knell of judgement, even the summoned spirits glancing across at him as he nodded to the masked Uchiha, "tell her of Madara's great plan and your part in it; I'm sure she'd love to hear how you honoured her memory."

"Madara," Uchiha Izuna, blind even in death, spoke, "are you here brother?"

"Oh yes, he is," Naruto disliked inflicting injury on innocent parties but, in this case, it was needed; the guilty could not repent their guilt until they knew all its impacts, "and a fine mess he made of your gift Izuna-san. I read about it in my school history, one of the first expressions of the Will of Fire even before Konoha existed. Rin-san, Izuna-san, your brother and team mate are before you," both the departed looked around, Rin excited, the Uchiha less able to read due to his experience and his blindness, "and, forgive me for what you see now, this is what they've been doing since your deaths."

"No!" Tobi's shout went unbidden, Naruto completing his spell before he could act and sending to the two spirits all the memories he'd gleaned from Pains' mind and his history books about what the two Uchiha had done. It lasted a second, a second that snapped bonds across space and realms of existence as Rin staggered, then feel to her knees, a film of effervescent water in her eyes,

"Obito," she whispered, staring at the figure before her, wearing the mask she had seen attack their sensei, "is that you?" He couldn't lie, not to Rin; his mask fell to the floor, exposing his maimed face and the Zetsu that made up half his body as he met her disbelief with his sincerity,

"It was for you," he whispered, urging her to forget the lies Naruto had told her and see the truth, that he would have made the world a paradise for her, "all for you." She began to cry in earnest,

"But, but sensei…" she lamented, seeing the fox unleashed again, her teacher dead to stop it, "you killed sensei!"

"He didn't protect you, nor did Kakashi," Obito shouted back, almost choking himself as the emotion hit him like a fist, "they failed Rin-chan; Kakashi murdered you!"

"I *chose* to die," she screamed back, face hardening as she stood straight, undisguised venom in her gaze, "Kiri had sealed the Sanbi into me, I would have destroyed Konoha - I jumped in the way of 'Kashi-kuns' attack to save the village. And you," the way she spat the word drove an icicle into his heart, "you tried to destroy it with the Kyuubi! You killed sensei; all those bijuu, everything that happened in Kiri for what, for revenge for me? You're mad," she declared, turning away as Obito lowered his head, spirit breaking all over again, "Obito died in that rock-fall, he would never have done this. I don't know who you are but you're not my team mate."

With that the Akatsuki leader slumped to his knees and moved no more, catatonic as the words echoed in his skull. Rin had been all that had kept him alive, let him regrow his shattered limbs and

battered soul and now it was all for naught; let the end come, he cared not. His progenitor had his own problems though, as with most things, echoed it more dispassionately than his protégé,

"I did as you asked brother; the clan was strong under my rule. When they chose the Senju over me they led themselves to their doom." Izuna followed the voice, his bandage regarding the eyes that had once been his before, equally solemnly, he replied,

"I have no brother," and looked away, towards the other voice he had heard nearby, "girl, Rin; is that your name?"

"Hai," the woman said, facing the blind man as he held out his forearm to her,

"I sense this isn't our place any longer," Izuna said gently, "forgive me for imposing but I would prefer a guide to lead me onwards." Swallowing hard Rin managed a weak smile, placing a hand on the pro-offered limb and pausing just long enough to shoot a last look of hatred to the comatose Obito before she led the Uchiha ancestor away. Releasing his spell Naruto allowed the lingering souls to leave, returned to the Pure world as he faced the last two Akatsuki,

"It is over," he said quietly, "you will not blight my plane again; the mists will have you now." With that he focussed, chains of mana shooting out of his back and into the cubes around him, puncturing the planar structure and letting the Blind Eternities, always at the threshold, in. His last sight before he 'walked away was that of Madara breathing clouds of flame, far more than Sasuke had ever done, seeking to keep the Eternities at bay while Obito remained oblivious to the creeping doom. It was a futile gesture; bound by his merged spark the Eternities knew all he did - the Eldrazi broods had learned what these two had planned with their fellows, and they were not amused.

Madara and Obito would die in the space between planes but it would not be the end of them; he had plans for these two, plans that did not involve them joining their friends and clan in the next life.

Their minds had turned the Elemental Nations to war, their souls might yet bring peace to another…

Obito's plane, as he'd suspected, almost overlaid his own, hence why the Uchiha had been able to jump as he had. It was therefore the work of a second to return and find himself in shadow, the forms of two of the Blind Eternities' foremost ideas bound together in a manner he didn't want to look at too long,

"That's both disturbing and probably marketable," he said to no-one before holding out his hand to the topmost titan, the great being responding with a small tentacle. Blocking out the raised screams from the shinobi army who'd seen what the otherworldly thing was capable he touched the manifest mana and started,

"You're kidding," he whispered, "that, actually explains quite a lot. So why didn't… oh, she couldn't; message lost in translation as it were. And you can't drag that weed free without ripping the plane to pieces - ayy," he sagged, formulating a plan before withdrawing his fist after giving some last-minute instructions and bracing himself for what came next; *time to let the bad things happen.*

"What is he doing?" Sakura had long gone past the point of fear, or even wonder; now it was just calm acceptance, Jiraiya by the side of her likewise not quite all there following his recovery from what he was reasonably sure had been absolute death,

"No idea but it's not eaten him"; *it probably had enough after the thousands it ate out there* ; he had thought bijuu were terrifying and they were, this thing wasn't simply because it was beyond them. There would be no more fighting against it than there would be an ant against a man but, after destroying the Akatsuki forces with the help of his godsons' clones, it had wrapped up the Shinju with its tentacle and just hovered there, blocking out the moon with its bulk. Then Naruto had returned, seemingly talked to it and now he was drawing what looked like a sword from under his travelling cloak; the

barrier he had first created was still in place and still impregnable despite the multitude of techniques that had been thrown at it, and it was sound-proof as well. Therefore no-one heard if Naruto said anything before he suddenly threw the sword into the air and raised his arms, the world descending into a black blur as extreme motion-sickness took hold of all of them. Just about holding her last meal down, Sakura winced as the Toad sage next to her noisily proved he lacked her intestinal fortitude,

"Nice," she muttered, only to really back-pedal when a thin stream of bilious fluid went squirting past. Well, she would have back-pedalled if she could move - it was like she was walking on air and, as she looked around to see the rest of the shinobi alliance in identical predicaments and then looked down to see a globe of blues and greens underneath her, her mind suddenly blanked when she realised the explanation.

Though it was logically right she, like everyone else, refuted logic, choosing to ignore it completely and put it down to something else to avoid breaking her mind. And when the world underneath her suddenly exploded she merely watched the pieces start to spin away into the blackness, rationalising this was either a dream, a nightmare or she was already dead and it didn't matter anyway. It didn't stay that way for long though; there was another flare of chakra from ahead, near where Naruto should have stood and suddenly the pieces stopped spinning, the chucks of the planet freezing like a bug in amber. Nothing happened for a long while, the molten core of the world glowing harshly in the vacuum of space as its crust was ruptured before a shadow was seen against its brightness, a speck trailing innumerable streamers from the broken world. These tails grew longer and longer still, the head more pronounced as the two gigantic chakra beasts, the Juubi and the thing that bore it aloft, were level with them, disappearing into another misty hole the first horror tore in the blackness and then passed through.

The hungry portal drank in the trailing ribbons of chakra like her former team mate had consumed noodles until they were suddenly

all gone, the tear closing as Naruto, glowing once more, began moving his arms counter-clockwise, the world under him destroying itself in reverse. All the bits fitted back together, the planet was whole again and suddenly the blackness before her blurred and she had solid ground beneath her feet, the sensation so unexpected she, like most of the assembled shinobi, fell ungracefully over. From down here she saw whatever it was that wore Naruto's skin exhale, a huge gust blown into the air and dispersing before stooped to recover something, then there was a cool pressure in the kunoichi's mind, a quiet but powerful voice in her ear,

" *Hear me all shinobi*," Sakura listened, they all did, they had no choice but to, " *only you here will remember what happened this day, all others will forget the memory. As your Sage of Six Paths gave you chakra so I have taken it away; the age of the ninja is over. There will be no more birthed on your world who can create chakra, it is a power humans should not have. However look around you*," she did and was amazed to see, even in the distance, naught but annihilation, the legacy of the world colliding back together, " *you are the last with this gift, how you use it will affect all who come after. You can waste your strength on pointless wars and give your children a land of ashes or you can unite, work together and fix the damage before it is too late. That is the choice I have left you, it is now yours to make - you will not see me again*," another door opened before him and, despite all that had happened, Sakura couldn't help but shed a tear as the creature wearing Naruto's face made to step through it, a last word left in his wake as he left the plane of his birth behind him forever,

" *Goodbye* ."

The door shut and all was still; the silence stretched on, broken only by the wind until at length Sakura became aware of a hand in front of her face and reached out, letting Jiraiya haul her to her feet,

"Got any water?" The old man asked, his tone far from its normal, jovial self, "Resurrection gives you bad cotton-mouth." Wordlessly

she handed over her canteen and watched him drain the lot, smacking his lips as he handed it back,

"So," she said, holstering it, "what now?"

"Now," Jiraiya repeated, looking perplexed, "now we do what he said; the war's done a lot of damage, there's a lot to rebuild. Where's hime?"

"She and the other kages left to fight Madara."

"Well have someone go and look for them; I'll take command until the kages are back in their rightful place," no-one argued as he began planning, "Sakura-chan get all the medical staff in one area and an inventory, sensors on me to scout out the wounded and we'll need anyone with a flying or fast summons to contact all the villages, find out what shape they're in. Look alive people, if I can do it anyone can," there were a smattering of laughs at this, especially from the former jinchuuriki who, like the Toad sage, were still somewhat lost in disbelief at what was going on, "we've got work to do."

As the shinobi alliance turned its attention from war to rebuilding they weren't the only ones left with a difficult job on their hands; following stepping into his eternal home Naruto had latched onto one of the streamers left by the titan Emrakul had restored to its proper place. Hauling himself in as the idea, like its big brother, unravelled into the Eternities Naruto at last felt flesh under his fingers and threw himself into a different place, quickly figuring out how to place this development into his plans and adopting the form most convenient to do so as he dragged the limp form into a real world.

The sun overhead was bright, so bright it almost burned her eyes but it was soon blocked out by a long, whiskered face,

"Soratami right enough," the voice drove needles into her mind, "not one I was after though. What happened?" She couldn't sit up; every

inch of her body felt like it had beaten thoroughly with a large club and her mind was even worse, her headache not made easier by the fact her eyes hadn't changed at all,

"Who, are you?" She managed a feeble croak before moaning; a small hand had seized her shoulder and dragged her half-upright, ignoring the silent screaming in her stomach as a bowl of something was thrust under her nose,

"Talk later, drink this," the water was mercifully cool and she drank both it and the mana it contained, reinvigorating after so long ensnared in a half-dream, "didn't know there was another of you; what name?" It took her a few seconds to remember even that much, thought mercifully some memories of cursed half-existence were starting to fade, as though she'd just awoken from a very deep sleep,

"Kaguya," she managed at length, "Kaguya Otsutsuki."

"Right, how you get there?"

"I was," the memory was coming back, slowly, "Oboro, I tended the gardens, the silk-fronds and moon-lilies. Then, then it was," she stopped dead, already-pale face whitening as she curled in on herself, "he, he found me in the garden, a diplomat from the man kingdoms. He said… he…" she couldn't go on, folding in on herself under the torment anew and, unseen, her rescuer clenched his paw, realising what must have triggered her spark; *and where the Sage came from! Sometimes I hate my race, and my gender* ; "but I was there and then I was not, Oboro was gone."

"Easy, easy," she stiffened, then slowly relaxed at a warm touch on her shoulder, "how long, do you know?" She shook her head, just able to lift her face from her knees and talk to her saviour directly,

"I kept moving; many thought I was diseased or some sort of monster," she admitted, sniffing deeply, "I wanted to be alone; I was low-caste in Oboro but I was happy in its garden. I found jungles and

rare blooms, taking seeds and moving them on until I went wherever you found me. Heard a legend of mythical tree, it was real; I took some cuttings and found it had flowered; when it fruited I took a bite to see what it tasted like. It is blurry after that." Her new friend chuckled squeakily, whiskered face creasing into an approximation of a smile,

"It blurry when I got there too - only luck I got you out. I know another from the clouds; we not on good terms but she listen if I tell about you. She help better than I; come on, up," it was screaming agony for the moonfolk to stand after so long but she managed, albeit tottering and with help from her much shorter ally, "take my paw; follow me."

Kaguya nodded and for the first time many years entered the Blind Eternities in the hands of her guide, seeking a pair of 'walkers he knew well and hoping they would be able to help the Rabbit Goddess, as innocent in this whole mess of the Multiverse as anyone else, over and through the traumas that had beset her; *and, if nothing else, I can definitely offer her plenty of gardens later, once she's recovered a bit…*

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 -… Opening a Window.

If you'd told me I'd be where I am now eight months ago ; the idle thought made Chandra smile as she knocked the sand of a distant world off her boots, the cobblestones quickly stained maroon; *I wouldn't have believe you. Hell* ; she snapped off her goggles, wiping under them with a cloth as she inhaled the mercifully cool air of Ravnica around her, albeit stained with the tangs of soot, magic and body odour; *sometimes I still don't believe it now* .

That was certainly true; she left Ravnica after sparring with its resident mind-mage and sought out Illustria, actually making notes on the plane now she knew what it was and how it had come to be. She'd almost been afraid to return but forced herself, preparing to take any kind of mockery or wheedling apologies out of Jaces' hide but to her surprise all had been as he'd said - she'd handed over the notes she'd taken and, albeit reluctantly, let the Ravnican take a look inside her head in exchange for bed, board and a look into his library, learning a few extra cantrips the journey to Illustria had taught her would have been useful. Her next journey had taken longer but she had returned to the same deal, only this time sweetened by something she had never expected, something that hit hard despite her sometime-landlord insisting he was just holding up his end of the bargain. She, however, wouldn't be beholden to anyone; since then every time she'd come back she'd done so with something akin to the leather tome she'd picked up from her latest travelling, though this time she'd found nothing of Naruto's endeavours. *A history of the Kami War, copied from the original account* ; she'd had to do some hard-core greasing to get her hands on this, the academics of Kamigawas' water-edge school were worse than the Azorius guild for red tape; *stuck-up guildless git better appreciate it* .

The thought held no malice; well, nowhere near as much as it should have done - tracking through the streets the firebrand casually sent a

few flares of flame towards greedy fingers, ensuring her possessions went unransacked by Ravnicas' innumerable thieves. The plane was becoming slightly more like home with every visit, she almost had a complete layout of most of the quarters of the massive city and could pretty much always find her way to Jace's quarter no matter where the tides of aether dropped her. This time they had been kind and she'd arrived on the borders of Gruul territory; the aftermath of the time she'd awoken in the middle of a Golgari rot-farm had been one of the most embarrassing moments of her life, especially since someone had snitched about it to Jace. It had taken the very real threat of turning everything he knew to ashes and leaving forever before the rat-bastard had promised to stop those damned illusions…

"Miss Nalaar, Miss Nalaar," the voice broke her from her trip down memory lane and she quickly put a name to it,

"Hmm, now I'm sure someone by that name mentioned a while back they don't answer to it. I told you Beleren lied about me," and he had, telling his motley collection of gateless staff she was likely to roast them on the spot unless they treated her like a queen; after she'd ferreted out that truth he'd had a shiner for a week; *which, admittedly, made him seem right. Felt good though* ; "he's the snobby one. Just call me Chandra." The other woman, one of the young elves who acted as groundskeepers, paused as she drew level, glancing around to see if they were being overheard,

"Sorry M, Chandra," the planeswalker smiled at her correction before frowning in concern; *she looks worried* ; "have you just got back?"

"Yeah, business with the Gruul took a lot longer than I'd hoped," like Jace she kept some secrets closer than others; his staff thought she was either a historian of Ravnica or some sort of diplomat, a thought that always made her smile, "what's eating you? The Golgari aren't recruiting are they?" The elf shivered,

"I hope not, I was hoping for the Seleysna," she admitted, her gateless clothing stitched with a small symbol of the guild she was

looking to join when she was old enough to petition, "but, sorry, it's about master Beleren."

"When is it not; what's the carnival mage got you poor guys doing now?"

"Nothing; none of us have seen him for days," the girl explained as Chandra cocked her head, "we all got a message telling us he wasn't to be disturbed until we heard from him again and none of us have. Everyone I've spoken to's the same and, you know what he can be like sometimes, a bit… carried away?"

That was a polite way of putting it; the more time she'd spent around the blue mage the more Chandra had realised he was marked by his mana as much as she was by hers. The ocean made Jace contemplative and calm for the most part but, like a storm, when its wrath or curiosity was roused it could lead to devastation for everyone concerned. She'd known him stay up all night tinkering with a spell or cantrip and shaken him awake after he'd fallen asleep in his favourite chair translating something; obsession for him was a dangerous thing. Still, there was no need to worry the youngster; fishing in her pocket Chandra smiled down at the slim, willowy figure,

"I'll deal with it Auriea, leave him to me. Here," she held out a couple of coins, "thanks for the warning, go treat yourself; the Boros parades are always good if you can get a decent seat." Auriea glanced at the money and reached out before, to Chandra's surprise, forcing her gloved fist closed over the currency,

"Keep it, I'll pay my own way; hey," she protested, laughter in her wide eyes as she fended off the hand ruffling her silver hair,

"If the Seleysna don't take you on point me in their direction, I'll show them the error of their ways. Still, I better go dig the mind-mage out of whatever book he's buried in; one day he's going to wake up with his nose black from the print." Auriea snorted and waved goodbye as the planeswalker turned to go, shaking her head and planning how to deal with what was likely awaiting her at the end of her journey.

Forewarned was forearmed, oddly enough that had been one of Jace's favoured saying but since she'd started exploring the Multiverse more she'd come to adopt it, especially when she managed to discover something that hadn't been there before, traces of the planesmakers' work. *Just because you can go somewhere doesn't mean you should, not without preparation at least* ; following this logic she'd prepared as much as she was able to as she counted off the numbers in this part of town. It was early evening, light enough to see the addresses by and she was easily able to vault the front gate, the security wards now keyed to her mana. She also had her own key, something Jace had been most insistent about after that one time in winter - honestly, melt one door lock to get out the rain and he'd never let you forget it…

"Jace," she called, as expected getting no answer, "right, coming in ready or not." Despite herself she smiled as the door swung shut behind her, swiftly darting up the stairs and pausing only to catch a glimpse of her reflection in the hall mirror. *He did a really good job with that illusion* ; since that unforgettable night Naruto had shown the pair of them up and then shown them the truth the glass gave everyone who looked into it a different hair colour; *though blonde doesn't suit me* . She shrugged, her feet finding their way to her room almost of their own volition as she let herself in.

The guest place had evolved over time and, though relatively little used, was undeniably hers. Chucking her travel pack at the foot of the bed Chandra glanced fondly at the work table she'd secured, strewn with now-dusty parts for her gauntlet and goggles and the tools she needed to fine-tune them. Alongside them was a lump of bright red stone, a coloured obsidian she'd taken from a plane she'd discovered (Pyronia, a name Jace still couldn't say with a straight face) and was slowly honing into a sculpture whenever she had a few minutes. The project a far cry from what it would one day be but she could afford patience; *though phoenix or fire elemental, that is the question. Later* ; after unbuckling her boots and annotating the huge, hand-drawn map of the planes she knew of that dominated the bare wall above her bed with information from her last trip she

wriggled her toes into the slippers she'd brought a few months ago, greatly relieved by the comfort as set off to find the errant Beleren; *first stop, library.*

To her surprise he wasn't there, though as she'd suspected he'd left something for her and, like every time before, a wave of triumph swelled in her chest at the sight of her collection growing. She'd been dismissive when, during her first stop-over after revisiting Illustria, Jace had cryptically told her his library had a new addition she might be interested in before leaving on errands of his own; he'd come back hours later and she'd only half-seriously slapped him for laughing at her engrossed in a book on his lounge footstool. He'd been as good as his word, somehow taking her rough assortment of scribbled and crossed out journal notes and the memories she let him have and turning them into a coherent dissection of the new plane. It even had things in there she didn't know of and, when she asked, he'd revealed that memories were precious not just for what they were but what they could be; looking through her eyes he was able to use his mana through them and blue saw far more than red did, giving new flesh to the bones of her first-hand accounts.

Now she had a shelf, albeit a small one, the half-dozen or so ledgers upon it jokingly know as 'the denouements'. The latest of these now stood shoulder to shoulder with its fellows, detailing the plane Azor (named by Jace as the plane was, in his words, as dry and dusty as the Ravnica judges were). Each was thicker than its predecessors save Illustria, which she'd revisited three times, each with more words that Jace, curse his fancy mind tricks, managed to multiply every time. It was becoming her personal goal to discover a plane and come back with a report so complete he wouldn't be able to add anything constructive but thus far she'd been undone, the Ravnican always seeing more through her eyes than she did herself, the git!

Still, something to read tonight ; counting the proof of her explorations she felt proud, prouder still at the new addition telling of somewhere that, to her knowledge, none in the Multiverse save her

and her sometime-housemaster knew of; *though I still haven't found Ilyonde. Or Jace for that matter* ; jolted from her reminiscing she thought for a second; *he wouldn't 'walk, his people are always guarding his place when he's not on Ravnica so he's got to be somewhere here. Can't hear anything from the lab, so…* ; she carefully called on the mana of the plane; though they were a way away from the Izzet guild there was still enough red mana here to channel for the spell she needed. Contrary to what she'd once believed fire couldn't solve all problems and she'd quickly learned the value of other schools of red magic, particularly those to do with locating things or finding the way, a small but amazingly useful pool of spells. Holding a mental image over the furnace of her mind she focussed, red mana leaking into the floor without igniting it, melding to stone rather than fire itself. She kept still, feeling the path the mana took towards what she wanted when suddenly she pulled it back, confused; he was below her, so far below there was only one place he could be; what was Jace up to in his cellar?

The thought he was a secret Rakdos cultist who'd invited a few neighbours over for a game of knife-and-candle made her snicker before she sped off to investigate, slightly worried - it would be just like him to have his nose in the air so high he fell down the stairs and broke his neck. The thought chilled her, as did the sight of the cellar door left open, a musty smell wafting up from below; *maybe he's making that mushroom wine he likes?* She couldn't stand the beverage, one of the reasons she didn't get on with many elves but Jace was partial to it and she had, in a pinch, brought a decent vintage back to the metropolitan plane as thanks for shelter if she couldn't find a novel he'd want. Swiftly descending the stone steps she lit the way with a flicker of fire, straining to see and holding her nose as the smell grew stronger - it wasn't just mushrooms, it was rot. The sudden vision of the mind-mage lying dead down here made her ball of light flicker erratically and she quickly raced down the last few steps, relieved to see no sprawled body. Risking a quick breath she glanced around, past the racks of bottle she'd walked through before; *red left, white right and the mushroom wine closest the floor where it's cooler. Come on, where the hell are you?* ;

"Jace," she whispered into the darkness, deciding that if he was trying to play a joke he was going to pay for it, "damn it this isn't funny!" Concern was rising in her mind as she fed more mana into her light spell, the shadows banished as she paced cautiously forwards before, at last, there was a shadow where none should have been. She could hear something as she stepped closer to examine it, something that made her both relieved and annoyed in equal measure even if the smell was getting worse the closer she got. She had to push the slightly opened hidden door shut to squeeze around it, then push it open again to look inside and, when this was done, the accusations and condemnations withered in her throat at the sight.

Inside the small oubliette obsession had devolved into mania; the smell was coming from plates of half-eaten food and opened bottles of wine left to foul. Chandra felt her gorge rise, her fear with it as she looked towards the master of this chaos, hunched over something at his bench with what looked like a metallic chime in one hand. By the light of the guttering candles Jace was a gaunt, gangrel horror, his usually impeccable clothing stained and hair unkempt as he muttered something unintelligible. Only respect for the mana he was channelling stopped the fire mage rushing over - interrupting a spell without specific countermeasures was not something done lightly. Metal and cloth creaked as she clenched her gauntlet, forcing her volatile temper calm as Jace continued muttering before ringing the slim chime, a single high note resonating through the air and beyond it. Before she could question what the hell was going on a sudden noise, deafening in the lingering silence, made her glance down at the table just as a small ledger she hadn't noticed ruffled and, slowly, levered open its front page.

A book? ; the question soon became the answer; *all this for a bloody book?!* Chandra felt her knuckles whiten as her landlord, seemingly amazed anything had happened, raced over to the opened page, his expression ravenous - she was going to kill him, oh gods she was going to kill him!

"No," the breathy whisper cut through her visions of retribution, growing louder and more frantic as the memory adept turned the pages frantically, "no, no; what is this?! I've tried every word, every phrase and incantation; there are no words left that could open you! Reveal your secrets; I've fed you enough power t-aarggghhh!" She wasn't sure what was more worrying; that Jace would get into a screaming match with an inanimate (if magical) object or that he'd lose it; the book had slammed shut on the fingers he'd jabbed into its opened page and he was now howling to free himself. Jamming his stinging hand between his knees as he eventually yanked it free, Chandra stepped back in shock as he slammed his unharmed fist on the now-closed cover,

"Damn you!" He bellowed, the noise echoing in the small vault as he staggered away, voice fading to a tremulous entreaty, "What do you want, what more can I do?" He slumped against the back wall, more defeated and crushed than Chandra had ever seen him, his haunted visage prompting her to speak,

"Jace?" He finally seemed to recognise he was no longer alone as she stepped forwards, "What, no, forget that when did you last eat, or sleep?!" Only when he'd turned to face her did she see the dark circles in his waxy face, the sight kindling both concern and fury,

"Chandra? When did you come in?"

"Too late by the looks of you; what have you done to yourself," marching past the remnants of the meals he'd scavenged it took force of will not to shudder at the full, gruesome sight, "you look like death and smell worse, what the hell for?" He didn't answer, it seemed to take him a few seconds to remember who she was and when he did he stepped past her, bloodshot eyes glaring as he pointed,

"This, this damned thing! He said I could read it but it, will, not, open!" Chandra took a deep breath to quell her rising fury; in the face of his madness it was up to her to stay sane,

"Where did it come from - the whole story, now." He grabbed for a bottle on his bench and made it on the second attempt, taking a generous gulp and not caring as it burned all the way down,

"Naruto," the planesmakers' name made her look at the book again, "knocked on my door, said he had business; could I look after it. Said I could read it if it'd open, needs powerful words of magic; it must be in there but I can't see it," he slammed the bottle down, only luck not shattering it as he let go and held his head in his hands, "I've tried everything, it eats it all and spits out mockery," he glanced at the seemingly-inert book bound to its chain, loathing in his eyes, "may the rats gnaw you forever."

Shouting wouldn't work and however much he deserved it knocking him out wasn't going to help in any meaningful way; those truths alone stopped the pyromancer delivering the beating the half-mad Ravnican deserved. Swallowing her wrath for later Chandra thought, teasing out the important bits of his story,

"So that's Naruto's book?" Jace nodded,

"When did he give it to you?" He shrugged,

"Don't know, been trying to read it since."

"You're an idiot," she spat, grip on her temper slipping, "I saw Auriea on the way here; she and the others were worrying while you've been down here! The only reason I'm not leaving you as cinders is because you're too far gone to feel it properly - let's see it then," she pushed past him, not hard enough to knock him over as he'd likely break something on the hard stone floor, "let's see what's caught your attention like a goblin with a shiny rock."

It didn't look like much, just a plain book with a dark red binding though she could tell it was definitely magical. Just for completeness she tried to open the front cover but it refused to yield; she thought about using mana but decided Naruto was probably rather not have his notebook given back to him as ashes - if someone did the same

to her notes after she'd made a planar discover there would have been hell to pay,

"You'll never crack it," she snarled at Jace's assumption even though he wasn't being malicious; he spoke as though it were a fact, "his mind's beyond mine; you probably need his mana or spark to bend it to your will, not just words." Ignoring him Chandra took a breath, thinking; *Naruto said Jace would need powerful words of magic but nothing he did worked. He wouldn't tease him* ; though she'd only met the planesmaker fleetingly a few times, each meeting relayed to Jace second-hand when she was back in Ravnica, she was sure the ninja wasn't malicious even if he did have a pranking streak; *which reminds me I still owe him for that spider in my pocket! There must be some kind of trick, something Jace wouldn't think of - that's a small pool of idea. What words of power do I know that won't burn this place down - nothing to do with unlocking things really, I just find… wait* ; she stiffened, memories of times before her sparks' ignition coming back to her mind, the brother she'd adored speaking while she'd been a mere slip of a girl; *powerful words… oh he couldn't? Yes, he could and he would, and Jace is too literal to think of it!* ;

"Jace," he dredged his attention out of its dolour enough to glance at her hazily, "just out of interest, if I could unlock this, what would you trade for it?" He laughed, the noise gruff,

"You do and, and anything - your wish, my command."

"I'll hold you to that," she turned back to the settled ledger and, feeling oddly self-conscious with the mind-mages' attention on her, cleared her throat, "listen I, ah, I don't know if this'll work but could you, you know, show us something, please?"

Nothing happened, not for a long second; she could all but feel the disbelieving scorn in Jace's gaze flaying her temple before to her relief and his startled gasp there was movement. Slowly and with infinite care the front page of the blank tome creaked, wavered and

then flopped open, the pristine parchment within soon covered in a sprawling scrawl,

" **Finally, someone with some bloody manners!** "

"Yes," Chandra couldn't suppress her glee; at last she had well and truly put one over on the insufferable Beleren, beating him at his own game. Looking up she flashed him her smuggest grin only to have it fade at his expression; it was hard to feel triumph against someone in such a pitiful state,

"You… you did it?" He whispered, his already-pallid flesh ashen,

"Yeah, I did; uh, how does this work, do I have to write what I want to say?" The first words faded and were replaced by a longer sentence,

" **No, just speak to me nicely - it's a pleasant change after four days of having mana and insults rammed down my throat.** " The number made her blanch in shock then mottle in fury,

"Four days? I should beat you to grease!"

"I, I had to know," he whispered back before his eyes gleamed with fever, trained on the now-unshackled novel, "and, Chandra you did it! Now we can…"

"I don't care," she shouted back, making him back up a pace, "I care that I've come home to find you half-dead and three-quarters mad! Why did you lock yourself down here, why didn't you wait for Naruto to come back and ask him; he might have teased you about it but he'd have told you. Answer me!"

He opened his mouth to reply and she steeled herself to counter his argument before, abruptly, there was no need; his strength deserted him and he shook his head slowly, looking haunted and miserable,

"I don't know; I just, I never thought about it," he whispered, his tone so full of self-hatred it banked her rage, "it was just one more spell,

one more try and I never stopped, I couldn't." She couldn't be angry, not really; Jace wasn't perfect but gods knew she had her flaws,

"You're a fool," she told him and he nodded, accepting the condemnation before stumbling forwards as she beckoned, "come on, it's done now. At least let's see what you nearly crippled yourself for - huh?" As Jace came to her shoulder she squinted at the unfamiliar word the book had blotted on the page in front of her, "Ku-rama? What's that?"

" **My name**," the book wrote back, " **I'm a sentient being and demand to be treated as one** ."

"You will be," Jace assured it, castigating himself for failing to even consider the magical text might contain a living mind; *though I've only ever read of such texts, it's one of the highest realms of magic. Even those that do exist contain the minds of those who wrote them, rather like the soul-cage of a lich - how did Naruto bind someone else to this book?* ; "I am sorry Kurama, I never thought…"

" **That's obvious**," being cut off by text was something new but he deserved it as much as he deserved Chandra's snickering, " **anyway, who are you two?** "

"Chandra Nalaar; the one who spent four days poking you is Jace Beleren," the pyromancer answered, knifing the mind-mage with a side-long glance, "so, uh, did Naruto make you or something?" The pages went blank for a minute before the answer came back,

" **Ha, with all the ideas in the Eternities that gaki couldn't make something like me. He did recreate me though, in a way; after we were separated he found me again and gave me back my capacity for reasoning - in exchange I agreed to help him. Just as well I did otherwise we'd all be up to our necks in chaos by now, and even then it took me a week to straighten out what he'd already done into some sort of logical order** ." Chandra flicked a curious glance Jaces' way only to see him mumbling to

himself before his eyes flew open and he speared a finger towards the opened tome,

"You're the Eldrazi that was sealed into him aren't you - he said he was jin-something, someone bound you to him when he was a child. You became a part of the Eternities again following his spark igniting; he tracked you down and made you, uh, more than an Eldrazi again?"

He had nothing in the way of common sense but he was one of the most insightful people she'd ever met; even half-crazed, half-starved and mostly asleep he made connections she'd need days to puzzle out,

" **The correct term is bijuu - it means tailed beast; my title was Kyuubi, the nine-tails,** "; *and of course, his insights have to be right* ; fortunately Jace was too busy reading the reply to gloat, Chandra's interest also peaked at the beings' words, " **after our father, the Sage of Six Paths created us we mostly forgot our origins and roamed the plane until humans captured us, sealing into their children to make jinchuuriki. When Naruto's spark awoke it was as you say; it returned me to my origins, transformed me from bijuu to Eldrazi and I dragged my host into the Blind Eternities, the idea that worked and will ensure the Universe is rebuilt from its fragments** ."

"So Naruto, he can summon Eldrazi; did he summon you and, well, form you into…?"

"Wait," Jace held up a hand to still his friends' question, explaining as Chandra looked at him sidelong, "let's start at the beginning; what can you tell us about Naruto, assuming he hasn't bound you to silence or anything?" *There might just be hope for you yet* ; that he hadn't immediately dived in and asked about what the planesmakers' plans were was an improvement but Chandra knew better than to trust a false dawn. Instead she held her peace and watched as Kurama wrote back,

" **What do you want to know?** "

"Just about him," Jace assured the transformed Eldrazi, exhaustion in his voice as he leant on the desk and struggled to remain conscious, "we asked, didn't you Chandra, but he didn't say much about his life before." Kurama was silent, his pages blank for a long time before, slowly, he wrote in answer,

" **He doesn't like talking about it for good reason; little of it is nice. I was sealed into him the night he was born and from that day he was all but damned by the village he was born in, treated with indifference at best, outright hatred at worst.** "

"Why?" Chandra's question was out before she could still it, feeling a certain kinship with the younger boy; she remembered feeling like an outcast all too well,

" **We bijuu were considered natural disasters Chandra-san, me most of all as I had been goaded into attacking Konoha, the Hidden Leaf village where Uzumaki Naruto was born; Uzumaki is his clan or surname depending on which form this plane uses. When it became known who I had been sealed into most of the village treated my jinchuuriki as a plague; though I was unconscious following the trauma of the sealing, I later learned that through his life a bare handful of people had ever treated him with anything more than scorn, and most of those were for political as well as personal reasons.** "

"Political?" That was a term familiar to any denizen of Ravnica, "Jinchuuriki are, ah, important on your plane?"

" **For all the wrong reasons; hosts of bijuu are expected to be weapons for their villages and treated as such**," Kurama explained, the words making the two planeswalkers go cold at the callousness of it all, " **Naruto was too important as a deterrent to attack and prison for me to kill so the Hokage, village leader, decreed none were to be told of the sealing who didn't already know of it. If this was meant to allow Naruto to make friends it**

didn't work; parents poisoned their children against him. He went through warrior training, becoming a shinobi on his own as none would teach him despite my presence making his control of his power poor at best. Then he was placed on a team, three junior shinobi who trained under an experienced leader, and he met his best friend-stroke-rival and the girl he loved. " Chandra exhaled slowly,

"They don't sound too bad." There was the rustling of sheaves, Kurama moving slightly before his thick scrawl came again, the letters jagged and spiky in rebuttal,

" **His team was a travesty; his sensei cared little for him, the girl abused him continually for her own ends and his best friend, hah; Naruto's spark awoke when that friend plunged a fistful of lightning into his lung!** "

"What?" Jace was too addled by sleep-loss to feel the same shock as Chandra, the woman bloodless at the account of murder, "Why?"

" **Obsession and greed for power and untamed, murderous fury against those as strong as he was**," the book told them, the unwritten parallels like a knife to the mind-mages' heart, " **he meant to kill Naruto to unlock a cursed power. He failed due to the spark awakening, and when my former prison catches up to him I'm sure he will regret even trying** ."

"Is, that where Naruto is now?" Chandra asked, as shaken as the Ravnican by the transfigured Eldrazi's words, "He's on his home plane to get even with his murderer?" Kurama flicked his pages again; it sounded like he was scoffing,

" **He doesn't care much for revenge, though he might take it if the opportunity arises. He's gone back to retrieve my brothers and sisters, the last remnants of the Shinju and, hopefully, the last Eldrazi spawn on the planes. Our sire the Shinju gave the humans their chakra, he'll take it away before it destroys the**

plane the God-tree grew on - it's a power most shouldn't be granted. "

"That's a little unfair…"

" **Says he who spent the past four days trying to bully secrets out of me**," Jace fell silent at the rebuke, " **that Naruto is a functional being after his treatment would garner my grudging respect; that he sought me out and gave me back what his spark burnt away earned my loyalty. I was the reason for his suffering; without me he would likely have grown up a powerful ninja and raised kits with a willing vixen, yet one of his first actions was to drag me back from the Eternities and grant me understanding and emotion again. That is why I'm grateful the hopes of those before the Multiverse rest with him - any other would likely break under them** ."

"His task," Chandra asked quietly, "to undo whatever caused the end? He told us of it, showed us what he has to do."

" **He showed you everything and nothing, as he always has**," Chandra looked to Jace only to see him looking as puzzled as she felt, " **none in Konoha knew his pain. They thought they did because of what he told them but they never truly knew ; he was the honest liar, protecting those dear to him by never revealing how much he hurt. Now he does the same to you; tell me with truth that you would turn down his abilities, the ability to create? Be grateful you are ignorant to the costs he bears to wield it and that he does so responsibly, not as the rage-filled child he has every right to be** ." Chandra was already thankful for some of those things; the thought of Naruto falling, as many 'walkers had, to madness of one type or another was something that kept her awake some nights. *But the cost…* ;

"Kurama," the quiet voice to the side of her broke her chain of thought, Jace speaking with real humility in his voice as he addressed the tome, "I can't deny it; I studied you, tried to take your secrets and his partly to discover what set Naruto apart as the

planesmaker, why he is more than we are. Now I want; no, I am asking you to please tell me something else," Chandra saw his fingers curl on the desk, nails biting into the bare wood and leapt to a guess an instant after it was too late, "can you tell me the price of his power, however terrible it is, so I'm never tempted by it?"

It was a selfish request made for the right reasons; she wasn't sure if she should be proud or enraged Jace had asked such a thing but it was the response that made her heart leap into her throat,

" **Do you really want to know?** " Below these words a shape took form, the monstrous paw-print of some great beast. Steeling himself, thinking it righteous penance for his transgressions Jace raised his nearest hand only for a grip like iron to seize his wrist; glancing around, he came eye to blazing orange eye with Chandra and his mouth dried up, his lip trembled,

"No…" Somehow she smiled,

"That's how this works Beleren, I do the exploring you write about it," she explained, placing his hand back on the desk before looking more serious, "if, ah, anything goes wrong though, pull me off." He nodded, entire body alert as she stepped forwards, flexed her fingers and, slowly, lowered her hand to the silhouette of the terrible paw. Jace didn't even count; as soon as she started to tremble he hauled her bodily away and sank to a knee, Chandra dead-weight in his arms as he frantically lowered her body to see her face. She was ghostly pale, face twitching as though trapped in a nightmare; without conscious thought his hand was on her brow, his mind rushing into hers regardless…

… of nothing, suspended in misty nothingness. No sound, no sensation, just endless white that stretched away beyond vision, beyond thought and kept going, the sheer scale pressing down on him. He tried to move, to do anything to relieve the terrible burden of the void but anything he did was inconsequential, the feeble flickering illusions he created as nothing to the ultimate abyss he existed in. He could barely move, breathing was a torment as the

lack of anything pressed in like a wall of steel, the weight doubling as something else, something that had existed in this nothingness since the Multiverse had begun, realised his existence and placed demands of its own atop his shoulders. There was the weight of nothing and now the twin weight of the need for there to be something, something he was seeking, something…

… no, someone!

This wasn't real, this was a memory, Chandra's memory - he had to find her. Thoughts of her, her hair, her laugh, her aflame, the face she'd pulled when she'd first sampled mushroom wine suffused the mist and suddenly she was beside him, a sliver of fire lighting the mist as she sought to lighten its burden. Moving was agony, like a turtle under a dragons' foot but he pushed, harder than he ever had in his life and caught her, ignoring the searing pain under his fingers as her mind-form scorched him as he withdrew; not up or down but outwards, pulling her with him, not letting go however much it hurt, however…

… warm it was; her brow was feverish and he slowly pried his palm away, drenched with sweat and trembling as the harrowing journey faded into his subconscious mind. He felt bone-weary, not just from lack of sleep but from the weight of the mind-walk itself, not to mention manipulating Chandra's dreaming mind as the firebrand lived up to her name. Blinking away spots he was relieved to see colour in her cheeks and even more relieved, a few seconds later, to see the orange of her eyes; her sight was as hazy as his until their eyes met, then in silence she stood, levering herself off his bent knee and swaying upright before helping him to his feet and making sure he wouldn't topple,

"You saw…?" Jace nodded, her hand warm in his as he caught his balance,

"Yes," he breathed, "how, *no-one* could bear that and stay sane." There was a thump, then another, the book that had sent them both

to the floor leaping around on the desk. Somehow it sensed them both, the paw-print disappearing and more writing left in its place,

" **That is the weight he bears, the longing of the Multiverse to become what it once was; I haven't and will not show you his personal pain, he asked for my silence. Do not be too alarmed though; Naruto spends much of his time within the Eternities, where the pressure is much less. We help as we can, the Eldrazi are united in his mission and his shadow clones split the burden, creating the empty planes where no living things exist. He suffers far less than another would, but it is a burden he bears nevertheless.** "

"It's not worth it," Chandra said, recovered enough from the terrible isolation to speak, "even for the power of a god it's not worth it."

" **And Naruto would be the last in the Multiverse to call himself a god**," Kurama told them, though why this was he kept secret for now, " **still his work is appreciated but that's depressing. You wanted to know about his life before - did he tell you he was a prankster?** " The two planeswalkers shared an uncomfortable glance,

"We were aware," Chandra said diplomatically, squirming in embarrassment of her drenching and what came after, "he was like that before he ascended?" As much as a ledger could grin, Kurama did, another paw scribbled onto its surface,

" **You have no idea; watch** ." She reached forwards and started as her hand touched Jaces; their eyes met and he made to pull away before she grabbed his fingers and pressed them down onto the page with hers.

Sometime later, how long she didn't care through the unadulterated chuckling at the antics of what had been the planesmakers' hell-raising childhood, she came back to herself and instinctively reached out to grab Jaces' shoulder, the mind-mage swaying as his mind reattached itself to his weakened body. Luckily the trip down

someone else's' memory lane had reinvigorated him somewhat and he looked more alert and alive, something that might have contributed to him thinking for a second before speaking again,

"Kurama?"

" **Yes?** "

"Regarding Naruto's, ah, job if you like, is there anything we can do to help?" He would never know how close that question cut to the quick in the former bijuu's mind; better than anyone he knew the other weight that pressed on his former jailors' mind but, mercifully, relief came swiftly,

" **Yes** ."

"What is it?" Chandra seized on the opportunity, "Any aid we, or I can lend he'll have."

" **Look right** ."

"Look right at what?" Jace asked, not seeing the other planeswalker present follow the instructions and start; only when a helpful arrow was scribbled on the page did he glance that way and see the short figure standing there,

"Naruto," he tried to make himself presentable as tiredness made his head swim, "uh, come in."

Timed it nicely ; in truth he could have got here a little earlier after tracking down the Moon Sage and her companion but Kyuubi was owed his fun,

"Thanks; urgh, what died in here? Oh," Jace cringed as he saw the graveyard of plates and rolled an eye his way, "your sense of taste."

"He never had that to start with," Chandra piped up, shrugging off her landlords' nasty glare as she gently reached down and closed Kurama, "how did you get in here anyway?"

"Ninja, poor security, bad combination," she smiled at the flippant reply, holding his book out,

"Here, I reckon this is yours."

"Sadly so; nine bijuu on my plane and I got the bad-tempered one - oh shut up, you know it's true," he demanded as Kurama rustled indignantly. The pyromaster regarded the pair of them as he slipped the chain over his shoulder, fighting the urge to drop to a knee and hug the boy; for all the fun his diary had shown her and Jace the memory of his burden lingered long. Instead she stood up and stepped back, hearing Jace at her shoulder as Naruto paused, looking up at the pair of them,

"So uh," he began, "what's going on here then?"

"What do you mean?" Chandra said carefully, hoping it wasn't what she thought he meant and feeling her stomach clench as the hope was dashed,

"Well, you know; you two, a hidden room, dim lights; sounds like either a prelude to murder or a bad romance," Naruto mused, glancing at the pyromancer as he had once before; *don't you dare!* ;

"Don't tempt me on the first; after what I found down here I was tempted; I'm sure your book will fill you in. Besides, romance," she swatted her companion hard on the shoulder, "he wouldn't know that if he checked a dicti - huh?"

A hand on her shoulder span her, a finger under her chin tilted her head back and light, soft pressure made reality phase out. Her entire being froze, shocked absolutely rigid until Jace stepped back, a slightly shy smile on his face as he tottered, apparently as unable to believe what he'd done as she was,

"What, you," she licked her lips and immediately regretted it, he'd been drinking mushroom wine, "just… *what?* "

"Sorry," he mumbled, hitting the far wall and sliding down it, "jus' wanted to. Funny, can't stand up." His chin dropped and didn't rise, only the movement of his chest showing he was alive as the pyromancer gaped, goggled and then outright gawked,

"You, don't just k…" she couldn't say it, "do that and, and pass out! Get up," she kicked his nearest leg but her slippers lacked the impact of her boots, "Jace get up, I can't kill you while you're unconscious! And you," realisation of the audience made her whirl, "don't say… !"

She was addressing air; Naruto had already 'walked away, the one witness to this act of wanton stupidity slipped out her grasp. Hands fisted in her hair Chandra wanted to rage, to set something on fire and most of all to beat Jace Beleren until he told her why he'd done something as stupid as he had but the Ravnican was asleep, likely for the first time in days, completely and utterly dead to the Multiverse. So she was left in a cellar cubby-hole with a snoring planeswalker, a face as red as fire, a scream of frustration she was too choked to expel and a slightly deeper heat she'd never expected to feel.

"That went well."

" **For you - 'his best friend shoved a fistful of lightning into his lung'! I feel so dirty…** "

"Details, and I'll let you run around for a bit later. Anyway what do you think about the whole Kaguya-thing; she could be a big asset and I reckon I gave her to the right people."

" **True, birds of a feather and all that, especially after what triggered her first 'walk. Speaking of which though Naruto, it's time** ."

"Not yet, give it a few more…"

" **You don't have a few more months to wait; you can't lie to me like you lie to yourself! It's tearing you apart, you have to start now - send out the snares at least, it could be months before any of them even see one. I still don't see why you're doing it this way - those two asked if there was anything they could do to help** ."

"And I'm grateful but it can't be just two Kurama, you know that - I've got to get a majority of them at once. They're like jinchuuriki in a way, strangers even in their own lands; they need something to focus on, something to distract them from the bigger picture until it's ready for the curtain call. You're right though, I've done most of the groundwork; send the message out; we start at the end of the week."

"Why, the hell, did you have, to hide, in the cellar?"

She should have left him there to fester but something, stubborn pride most likely, had forced her to get him off the cold stone floor, at least to the kitchen. Then after navigating the treacherous cellar stairs with her comatose burden she couldn't leave him there; what if someone saw him through the window? The bottom of the stairs was out in case she tripped over him in the morning, as was the landing, so she gasped that irate question as she threw the snoring Ravnican onto his own bed, Jace not even twitching as she went to work,

"You are the most insufferable bastard I have ever met," she told him, pulling off his cloak and grimacing at its stains with practised ease; this wasn't the first time she'd put a drunk or exhausted man to bed, "you make me panic, you make me furious, you humiliate both of us in front of bloody Naruto, the closest thing we'll ever see to a deity and then you faint before I can yell at you for it. I swear," she hissed viciously, tugging his shoes off, "the second you wake up I'm making your life hell Beleren, and I am never going to forgive you for, what you did." She paused in her tirade enough to unbutton his jerkin, pulling it off as flopped he around lifeless, not concerned too

much by the odour; after a few days on the road before arriving in Ravnica she wasn't exactly fresh herself,

"And I can't shower now I'm too busy looking after your messed-up arse - how the hell did you get that many scars, pick a fight with a barrel of knives? You'll tell me tomorrow, and if Kurama tells Naruto what you did and he wants to get his own back I'm holding you down while he punches! The quest for knowledge almost bloody killed you; urgh, you really did lose a toe." He had mentioned that injury before but never shown it while she'd laughed at anyone succumbing to frostbite; having seen the ragged stump she'd laugh no more. She didn't look for long, instead tossing the blanket over him when she was sure he was on his side and wouldn't roll onto his back.

Finally done she stood to her full height, massaging her aching forehead as she tried to forget the night had ever happened. Running her hand down her face she glared at the Ravnican but despite her ire couldn't quite hold it; asleep Jace finally looked peaceful, the lines and strange tattoos on his face relaxed despite the tiredness under his eyes. *Circles you deserve, honestly who in their right mind forgets to even cat-nap?* ; the treacherous part of her mind that whispered about people who practised magic they weren't supposed to was ruthlessly squashed as she regarded him for a long minute, smiling despite herself; once before she'd had the mind-mage at her mercy like this; *yeah, I saved you then Jace. And this time I made Kurama spill his guts so you better remember that* ; the rosy glow of victory suffused her as she clenched a fist in triumph, mentally cheering over her rival as she turned to leave; *sweet dreams, you're going to need them after I get hold of you in the morning. You'll be regretting what you did the sec…*

She was at the foot of the bed when she stopped stock-still as for the first time in her life black mana surged through her; there was no other explanation for her sudden idea. It was beyond evil; it was something no-one would do to their worst enemy but surely it was the sweetest of sweet revenge. Lost in his slumber Jace would never know how lucky he was he never saw the firebrands' smile as she

turned back to him - it was the grin of the monster in the closet that made children afraid to sleep and, as her shadow spread over his slumbering form, it was reserved solely for him.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 - The Morning After.

Dawn on Ravnica was a necessarily noisy affair but, for the most part, those in affluent neighbourhoods avoided the majority of the bustle. Today looked like it would be a fine one; everyone was preparing for the celebration of the Guildpact and there was little aggression in the air; the birds and thrulls were singing and moaning, the sun was bright in the sky and all was *continuous, uninterrupted hell…*

I'm dead ; that he could think proved he wasn't but the notion was so comforting he refused to let it go; *I've expired and the Church-goers got hold of me - I'll be starting my petition for the Ghost Council soon. Uh, the sun* ; it was never that bright before, one of the guilds must have tilted it so it shone directly into his bedroom, stinging the eyes he was forced to lever open. His first breath in was a death-rattle and the first one out would have dropped an ogre; his entire body was sore and battered and he couldn't remember what had happened for him to get this way. *Wine, there must have been wine involved* ; he could taste it on his lips along with something sweeter he couldn't place, his memories scattered until the mental vision of a big orange book hit him and he groaned. He'd gone overboard, so far overboard the Izzet would have to invent some kind to ship that could sail underwater to find him. He remembered the first day well enough, the logical order of the spells he'd used to try and unlock Naruto's cursed gift, the second was a little more haphazard, the inevitable slide into stumbling and having to re-incant some of the more complicated spells, a frustration that bled into the next day, making it a blur. The fourth he could barely remember at all, desperately pumping mana into the damned book, trying to unravel it before Naruto came back; his fingers ached suddenly and, why did he remember crimson in his vision…?

Every muscle in Jace Beleren's body went absolutely rigid as he became aware of something very, perhaps critically important; he was not alone. There was something next to him, something warm; *no…* the fingernail that tickled up his backbone was a searing poker, the memories traitorously piecing themselves together even as he tried to blot them out;… *oh no…* ; the blanket moved, his shoulder-blades burning like they'd been overlaid with flaming coals as the something moved up next to him; *… please any god, anything out there in the Multiverse no…* ; his body jack-knifed as twin crescents brushed the nape of his neck, creeping closer to his ear as he silently implored, prayed, *begged* for a miracle,

"Hey lover." There were no gods and the Multiverse hated him; burned hollow with miserable terror Jace slowly rolled over, masochistically forcing himself to witness the final proof of his damnation. He saw a rush of fiery hair, a swathe of ruddy skin in the rudeness of health and a wicked smile before he pushed himself backwards so fast he shot from under the covers like a bar of soap.

And on that fine Ravnican morning Jace Beleren, one of the most powerful planeswalkers of his time, fell out of bed in a heap.

The pain in his back was nothing, absolutely nothing to the agony of his pride, a deeply-wounded instrument only flayed more grievously by the sudden hysteria that shattered the morning still. Sprawled on the floor he didn't even bother to move as the waves from an ocean of humiliation washed over him, slowly piecing his memories back together and, with each one that slotted into place, making a different plea for death to find him before his former bedmate did. She laughed for quite some time, soft thumps as she hammered the mattress in her mirth a backing beat to her hilarity and his anguished moans. Sadly for both concerned all good things must end; slowly the hysteria died down and all was silent until Chandra recaptured enough breath to speak,

"That," her voice was faint from such prolonged laughter, "that was even funnier than I thought it'd be. Still alive down there?"

"Let me die in peace you evil horror," Jace pleaded, clutching the blanket that had fallen with him, his last friend on the plane, a plea that went unheard as a familiar grinning face popped into view,

"Sorry you can't die of embarrassment; you have to live through it and that's going to take a long, long time!" He scowled at her teasing, pulling the blanket over his head and not moving as a hand started shaking him a second later,

"Oi, don't ignore me; Jace Beleren I dragged you up two flights of stairs last night and if have to pull you up now I'll cut off more than a toe!" So she'd seen that while he'd been out - great, and she'd likely go through with her threat as well; *fine, I'll be hanging myself for this later so it can't get much worse* ;

"All right, all right," he capitulated, pulling the fabric down, "I'm awake."

"Good boy, now sit," she patted the edge of the mattress and despite himself he growled, reaching up to grab the material and painfully heave himself up, Chandra shuffling backwards as he flopped back onto her level. To his mingled relief and disappointment she was wearing a thick undershirt, though where her chainmail was he could only guess as she pushed herself kneeling, pointing towards the far wall,

"Face that way, you're not a pretty sight." Jace thought about retorting but thought better of it; she probably had every right to be aggrieved by his actions, even those he still hadn't remembered. The mattress creaked under his weight and then again under hers, Jaces' shoulders heating up in time with his face as she moved behind him,

"Uh, what are you doing?"

"Quiet, you don't want me to get this wrong," she warned him, placing her fingertips on his temples. He said nothing even as his skin suddenly heated up; the warmth was uncomfortable for a minute

but eventually the heat suffused his head, eating his pounding headache like fire did kindling. There was silence for a while before he placed his hands in front of him and concentrated, Chandra's heated touch helping him focus and pull a small bubble of water from the surrounding air. He sipped it greedily, wetting his parched throat before the weight at his back shifted,

"Pass some here, I'm dry too."

"A dry fire mage, I'm sure there's a joke there," he chuckled grimly, holding the orb of water up and back; he then winced as Chandra jabbed her fingers into his temples harshly for an instant before leaning forwards, the mind-mage left trying not to react as she pressed into his shoulder blades before settling back,

"Thanks." Jace nodded, holding his water in one hand as he gently brushed her fingers away with the other, slumping wretchedly as the full enormity of what he'd done, what she'd seen the previous night finally sank in,

"Thanking me's the last thing you should be doing Chandra; I am so sorry." He felt her tense and he did too; was the reminder too soon, his apology not sincere enough? He was so busy thinking he barely felt her hands on his shoulders,

"Tell me something, how can you of all people be so smart and so stupid at the same time?"

"It's a gift."

"Well stop using it; I thought you were possessed, or one of the Orzhov had you and gods only know what Naruto's thinking now!"

"What can I say - I was drunk? That's a lie and both of us know it - I just, Naruto gave me that book and I, I had to know."

"Had to know what - what was so important you half-killed yourself and then dragged me into it as well?" He was silent for a moment,

centring himself as best he could and bracing for her reaction,

"Please don't judge me for this - I was lo…"

"Forget it."

"What?"

"I said forget it," but what she said wasn't as important as how she said it, "I'll find it for you, I can just ask Kurama - he likes me more than you after all."

"But…"

"And anyway," she preened, no-so-secretly enjoying baiting the normally stoic aqua mage; *he's going to snap in a minute. Ah well, I've survived worse than him* ; "it's the job of greater mages to ease the burdens on those less than themselves. Don't worry your tattooed head Beleren, leave it to your betters to get your questions answered."

That was a hit below the belt, below the kneecaps and possibly below the bootlaces as well; Jace went still, absolutely motionless as he tried to register what she'd just said. Despite her bravado Chandra was a little afraid but hid it behind amusement as, still facing away, he demanded softly,

"Say that again." At the limits of even her daring she patted him on the head,

"Well one of us opened that book, don't worry though I'm sure you've have gotten it given another month or so. Nothing to be ashamed of; some of us have talent and some, well, trial and error works too."

"Right," the word was so soft she had to lean forward to catch it, "that's it, I've had it!" Only when he threw the remaining water to splash against the wall did she scramble backwards, far too late; Jace span and tackled her, clasping his hands around her neck as

she went sprawling, "you can drain my cellar, shock me half to death and beat me in a kicking contest but you're *not* a better caster than me; we're equal Nalaar, say it!"

"Never," she grated back, Jace's grip holding her down but nowhere near tight enough to cause even discomfort as she fought to get free, "the truth hurts Beleren, just like this!" He reared back swearing, saw the hairs she'd yanked from his pectorals and a flame of vengeance caught light behind his eyes,

"Oh I'm going to - no," inspiration hit, "better idea!" He pounced before she was ready, the firebrand left desperately stifling giggles as fingertips savaged her sides and stomach,

"Not just your feet then? Good," he declared, grinning as Chandra couldn't hold it and her helpless delirium this time salved his battered pride, "you want to laugh at me; fine, laugh!"

"Don't!" She blurted, thrashing and suffering under his touch until she spotted salvation, Jace unaware of his peril until a heavy impact on the side of his head made his vision double,

"Die, die," his enemy demanded, belabouring him with swipes from her snatched up pillow, "nobody does that to me and get aw-ahhh!" She'd driven him off the bed, retaking her knees but as she came forwards to press her attack he squatted and then stood, the blanket he pulled off the floor half-closing over her and giving him back the advantage.

They wrestled and fought without quarter, no trick was too underhanded, no blow too low; one of the pillows gave up the ghost, disintegrating into a cloud of down as the two tugged for it and leaving them covered in white feathers. Neither would forfeit, neither would retreat and it seemed nothing would separate them until Chandra saw red, broke away and shouted,

"Jace, Jace stop," the fear in her tone held him still, "you're bleeding!"

"What?" His fingers followed hers and he gasped as they came away bloody until he realised, "Oh, it's alright, must have caught a piercing - ow!" He clutched his now-throbbing chest, looking at the fire-mage betrayed, "What was that for?"

"For scaring me, twice," her face was tight with anger, teeth bared in a snarl, "I've seen zombies more alive than you looked last night! Was Naruto's power worth half-dying for?" Her accusation hit much deeper than her punch,

"I wasn't, it wasn't for that!"

"You admitted it, that's why Kurama took us to that blank space," she denounced his defence, the fun draining away like blood through a wound, "you were trying to find out about it, you just couldn't…"

"I don't want his power, I wanted to know the price Kurama said it cost," Jace howled back, "I wanted to know where the planes he's made are."

Chandra saw horror dawn on his face, could even see him trying to think how to undo the damage but his apologies and obfuscations were doomed; she couldn't unhear his admission. Stabbing her would have been kinder; that she could have recovered from but not this, not deceit on such a scale. The words echoed in her head like a death-knell, ice flooding her chest as his veil of deception was cast aside to reveal her foolishness,

"You bastard," she was too numb to feel even anger yet, "soon as you found a faster way you were gone. What was it," her laugh was black and broken; should she hate him or herself more; had she learned nothing from her mistakes? "sick of paying my food and lodgings, like a damned dog not good enough for you? This was mine, I was finding them and you'd, steal… bastard!" Wrath hit her like a wave of magma and it felt good, as good as the feeling of her fist slamming into him did. Flinging herself at the revealed traitor she pummelled every inch her waterlogged vision could see until her arms were seized and a voice burst about her like a thunderclap,

"Listen to me, *listen*," he'd dragged them eye to blazing eye, "do not *ever* accuse me of stealing Chandra; I've done nothing to deserve that! It wasn't for me, never was!" He wasn't lying; this close she could see the tear escaping down the side of his nose, the agony etched in every line of his face,

"But," nothing made sense, she couldn't make it make sense, "Naru…"

" *Forget about Naruto*," he exploded, pushing her away and despite her legendary temper the fire mage quailed; she'd never seen Jace lose control like this, his face scarlet, his whole being wracked, "you stupid irrational bitch get it through your skull I don't care about him - it's you I worry about! You're gone weeks, months and I'm here going insane thinking when or even if I'll see you again! I help, record all your discoveries but it's not enough, nothing I did made a damned difference. Then he gave me that book and I, thought," rage deserted him, the last of his confession spilling in misery, "I thought if it had a map, if I had a map, then you'd know where to go and I wou-wouldn't worry you'd not come back."

He couldn't look at her; he could only watch his tears drip steadily between his knees. All was silent for an eternity, one in which he expected to hear Chandra leave but she didn't; instead she spoke in a voice as uncharacteristically tiny as his had been loud,

"You should…" but so should she, his confession reverberating in her mind so hard she could barely speak, "..why wouldn't… why didn't you tell me?!" Somehow he raised his head,

"I, I couldn't," his voice was a throaty, choked whisper, "I didn't know, how; couldn't."

"Damn, Jace," she hissed, chest hitching as though a knife was being plunged into it and hurting only marginally less, "damn it, idiot I, I…"

They broke in the same instant; she fell into him, Jace shivering crown to toe as he surged onto his knees and lifted her caged in his arms, heart hammering so hard it hurt. Burying herself in the crook of his neck, lightning running up and down her spine as he stroked her long hair Chandra wanted to scream, sob, laugh and flee all at once, torn so many different ways all she could do was hold on castigating their stupidity. If Jace was at fault for saying nothing why hadn't she told him she sometimes missed Ravnica and those on it so much it was a struggle to stay on her hunt? Or about the nagging doubt she'd return to find his guestroom rented to a stranger and the relief that washed through her every time she found it still hers? Or her fear he'd find one of her thank-you gifts insufficient or too embarrassing? The irony was so bitter she felt sick; two of the most powerful magic users in existence, able to face down demons and dragons, reduced to this by being unable to talk to each other.

The shoulder of her shirt was wet, Jaces' skin likewise as they clung on through a tumult of emotions as powerful as their sparks. Resentment, anger and bitterness were worn away to leave just them, nude to the core of their jaded souls and naked to betrayal and abandonment, the sharpest daggers either could plunge into the other. Both had known their sting and never-healing wounds and that morning both hurled those swords away; it was cathartic pain, healing agony and at some point it ended but their embrace didn't. As their breathing evened and tears dried they held each other whispering reassurance and apology both; only by a sudden and visceral soreness was their grip broken, Chandra speaking at the mind-mages' jostling,

"Jace?"

"Sorry," he muttered, not stopping his slow, continual caress of her fiery locks, "cramp." She chuckled wetly, the movement sending thrills through both of them before she slowly unclasped her arms from around him, wincing at the ache as he sat facing to the wall to her left. She felt light-headed, light all over - she had to say

something as he rubbed his right calf, a crust of blood the perfect excuse,

"Why do you have those piercings anyway? Do they mean anything"?

"Yes, I was young and stupid enough to believe in fashion once."

"Really? They're not mystical or anything - I thought your tattoos glowed when you channelled mana?" He shook his head,

"Not by themselves, I do that to frighten people off; yes, I know," he sighed at her smirk, smiling faintly, "it loses a lot of its impact once you explain the secret."

"A lot of things do, magical notebooks included."

"You're never going to let me live that down are you?"

"Not a hope, and don't," there was more than warning in her tone, it was some strange anagram of threat and plea as she pushed his arm, "make yourself forget it either Jace, I mean it."

"I know," he said solemnly, looking up at her as he pulled his legs in, "I wouldn't, not something that important. What now Chandra," he let out a shivering breath, "I can't do that again, any of it."

"Me neither," she said honestly, a wan smile on her tear-stained face as she sank onto her hip by his side and placed the hand not supporting her on his forearm, fondness in a gaze that had once held only scorn, "how's this for a start? Friends, Jace Beleren - true friends, not just business; we've got each others' backs regardless what happens?" His eyes, slightly more hooded through lack of sleep, were likewise as he covered her hand with his own,

"True friends Chandra Nalaar - damn it why couldn't we have had said that before, this?"

"We're both idiots?"

"No," he gently took that suggestion down, replacing it with a more accurate one, "we were both afraid - how sad is that? When did I become afraid to trust someone I've know years?"

"Same time I did," Chandra muttered, sitting beside him, "that's a problem with the spark - sometimes it's easier to run away from or bury what you don't want to talk about."

"True, gods that's true; you should get that framed," the Ravnican sighed, somehow dredging up a laugh as he looked at her seriously, "about last night…"

"Don't."

"I must," he spoke over her protest, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you; I've never meant to do that. Forgive me?" She glanced at him sidelong, let out a small,

"Hmm," then impulsively darted forwards, their lips brushing before she could feel embarrassed and snickering as he went as rigid as she had earlier, "you're forgiven - we're even now."

"W'what? I never, did I - oh gods I'm sorry." A pit dropping open in her stomach as he buried his face in his hands Chandra cringed; *of all the times for his memory to fail* ;

"Uhh, sort of; don't worry you were out of it, I wasn't going to set you ali… you ass! You absolute swine," as his confused facade dissolved into muffled laughter she scowled, shoving him so hard he almost skidded off the bed, "I take that forgiveness back, no I take back every nice thing I ever said about you!"

"All three of them?" Jace chortled, standing up and noticing the rest of her outfit scattered haphazardly at the side of his bed, his own clothes thrown to the far end of the room, "Shouldn't take long."

"Too right, in fact," he didn't like the slyness in her tone as he unhooked a spare robe from his wardrobe, "won't take as long as

this'll take you. I'll have tea sweetened with honey, toast lightly browned, eggs scrambled and whatever meat you've got sizzling made quick as you can; off you go."

He stayed where he was, half in his robe, unable to decide if he should be amused or appalled as she brushed off the worst of the spilt down and threw the blanket over herself, hands behind her head as she reclined,

"I'm sorry," he said softly, not sure if he wanted to laugh or bellow, "you strip me to almost nothing, shock *years* off my lifespan, insult my talents as a caster and rip half my ear off, and now you want me to make you breakfast?"

"Yep, I remember a certain 'walker not a thousand leagues from here saying if I could open a book for him my wish would be his command," surely there was no greater pleasure or irony than turning a blue mages' words against him, "so jump to it; want me to write it down?"

"But, you - fine," he knew when he was beaten, even if that beating came curtsey of the most infuriating woman to force her way into his life; *but graceful in defeat doesn't mean I can't get the last word in* ; "I suppose it's for the best I do the cooking, at least that way you won't put any more meat on your legs."

He timed it nicely, just outrunning the pillow that hammered into his bedroom door as Chandra's language chased him down the landing. As much as she had a sore point about her body her legs and thighs were it; as she was always on the move they were muscular and well-built, certainly she could outrun and outkick him if she had to. *Still, she knows I don't mean it* ; he'd make sure of that later, when he had a tray of cooked vittles to use as a shield; *but what to do now? Well, apart from clean the cellar out and contact everyone I've not had into work* ; there were two jobs he wasn't looking forwards to, the latter less than the former as he knew quite a few of his sometime-servants were happy working for him, though why that was he had no idea; *but after that what about Chandra? The*

Guildpact celebrations' over two weeks away - would she stay for that long? What else is going… wait ; as he set the kitchen fire a sudden thought occurred to him, a message from one of his contacts in the Tenth district; *yes, about those marks, the Izzet were definitely involved. It might be a chance to get one of those crackpots to take a look at her gauntlet - well, I can ask.*

He did ask and she did agree, an agreement that would affect both Ravnica and several lives on it as an ancient threat to the safety of the Tenth district was uncovered and a frantic race against time began. Fortunately their efforts helped avoid widespread devastation to the city and, albeit unwittingly, recruited some help for both Chandra's expeditions and, though they didn't know it, a more distant purpose as well. Even as those hectic weeks and months ticked by and culminated in the new Guildpact being coronated rather than signed, somewhere worlds away someone seemingly insignificant was approached, interrogated and mercifully granted his life in exchange for the destruction of his merchandise. As his bad-tempered customer stormed away the storekeeper shut up shop for the day, disappeared into the back and sent his short but important message…

… *we got a bite!*

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 - The Gathering.

Why did I take this job? ; the most powerful or influential man on the plane; that was a laugh, even the best of times he felt like some combination of schoolteacher, referee and ringmaster; *sure as hell wasn't the pay!*

It wasn't the office either, a hastily-converted former Boros barracks that had been declared neutral territory by the leaders of all ten of Ravnicas' guilds. It was a tall building, built strong but with little charm, a perfect place to the new Guildpact to sort through all the business of running a plane-spanning metropolis, hear various Guild announcements and, worst of all, chair the Guildmeet, a weekly cycle of unrelenting torture that never failed to deliver bitter resentments, angry shouting and the odd fist-fight. It was a morning that usually had him hiding in his office swearing never to forgive one of his usual-allies all afternoon but, mercifully, it wasn't this morning and he was able to smile at the lithe, armoured form that let herself in,

"Please Lavinia," the woman came to a crisp halt at her name, looking at a point some six inches over his left shoulder, "I'm begging you, tell me this is the last of the damned requests for the day?"

"I would love to Guildpact, but I would be lying," Jace groaned dramatically, keeping an eye on his assistant - it was kind of a game between them; if she looked at him directly or smiled or used his real name he won, if she didn't before he dismissed her she did. He wouldn't have had anyone else in her shoes though; the former arrestor was a pinnacle of administrative excellence, scything through a lot of the paper that tried to clog up Ravnica's workings and make his job even more unbearable. However though he'd only had the post a few months he had always been a quick study; there

were tells in her rigid posture that spoke of something out the ordinary, something very much like trouble,

"Everything all right Lavinia?" The game was abandoned as she shook her head, looking into the planeswalkers' face directly,

"No; there's someone here to see you, says it's urgent and she won't leave until she does. She's a mage of some kind, I could smell it on her and I don't think she'll take no for an answer."

"You've seen her?"

"Saw to it personally when the alert came through; she's waiting in the main hall, this place doesn't have a waiting room."

"Not yet," it was another project that was continually pushed to the back-burner but there wasn't time to dwell on it now as Jace prepared to expand his mind, "with your permission?"

Lavinia nodded, used to the sensation of the foreign mind in her own since the running and culmination of the Implicit Maze, the successful conclusion of which had stopped judgement being passed on a large swathe of Ravnica. She closed her eyes, let the memory come to the forefront of her mind and tried not to react to the gentle invasion; nowhere near as forceful as he'd been when he'd merged their minds to thwart the Supreme Verdict, it was still a struggle to keep her posture through the mental tickling as he gently teased through her memories.

Suddenly the presence was gone and she took a breath, recovering her composure in time to comment on the Guildpacts' suddenly grim expression,

"Everything alright Jace?"

"Not exactly," his answer was both diplomatic and a long way from the truth, the vision from his assistants' eyes awakening memories long buried for good reason, "how much more paperwork is due?"

"Only another four or five proposals scheduled." *Something's up* ; though she knew little of the council leaders' personal life the former Maze Runner knew he was rarely malicious, hence why his suddenly malefic musing was so concerning,

"Pull another dozen or so forwards from tomorrow's schedule would you; I'll sign them off now and we can all go home early after the Guildmeet. Yes, that'll do nicely; I could do with a break after the damned council which I'm sure you're going to enjoy sticking your oar into."

"I might," the arrestor admitted, feeling only slightly guilty at the pleasure she took every time she corrected the Guildpact on the points of law he had to quote; she'd been trained to recite most of them off by heart, if he didn't have the dedication or time to follow her example that was his look-out, "what about…?"

"If she's that desperate she can wait," Jace assured her, reaching for his quill and striking through the list he was writing with vicious aplomb; childish maybe but damn if it didn't feel good, "she's already circumvented several protocols in coming here directly and no-one is above the judges." Despite herself Lavinia smiled at the oath of her guild,

"And if she starts trouble?"

"Detain," Jace's tone was colourless except for, maybe, just the merest trace of hopeful anticipation, "with extreme prejudice."

Some eight days after that delayed meeting found the Ravnican at home, blurring through a number of the few attack spells he knew while thinking hard - much as he'd have preferred to shoot the messenger the message was worrying, if cryptic. His attention split between his preferred duelling style, careful defensive spells followed by rapier strikes to his opponents' vulnerabilities, and the message he failed to heed the warnings until his training circle was breached and by then it was far too late. Even as he was turning a

crushing pressure wrapped around his throat from behind, the back of his knees kicked out as a thick, disguised voice grunted,

"Guess who?"

"Hmm," he thought, trying to prise the arm from around his neck, "Dimir assassin out to silence the Guildpact?" The armour around his throat creaked, pinching his neck slightly,

"Guess again."

"Very strong," he couldn't shift the arm wrapped around him like a noose so felt backwards, cold scales under his touch, "armoured, obviously a skilled mage to avoid my sensors, possibly a planeswalker, probably alluring… Vraska? Urk!" It was pinching before, now he could barely breathe as,

"Last chance," was growled into his ear. He said nothing, instead suddenly reaching behind him and down, forcing his assailant to release him with a yell. They backed away as he tottered, caught his balance and turned, falling into a defensive stance,

"Aha, I thought I recognised that knee; the Rakdos have made their move. Come on then assassin, you'll find me a hard challenge." The stranger snorted,

"I doubt it."

Five minutes later gave good reason for that doubt; flat on his back with the knuckles of a scuffed but still deadly metal glove grazing his chin Jace held up his hands,

"I surrender; the Guildpact belongs to the Cult - ow!"

"No it belongs to me," Chandra corrected him as he rubbed the nose her metal-shod digit had flicked, "I keep turning those madman down after that whole nightclub debacle - gods know why they want me as an honorary member."

"I can only guess," Jace mused teasingly before accepting her hand up and embracing her loosely, the firebrand smiling as she wrapped an arm around him in kind, "we were all lucky to get out of that mess in one piece."

"You especially; you really need to practise more Jace, sitting in that office is killing your skills."

"I was never much of a duellist," he admitted before glancing over her shoulder, "where's your, ah, glamorous assistant?"

"Went back to the Golgari, said she had business she had to deal with."

"Damn, I need to speak with her as well as you," the mind mage swore before disengaging his training circle with a wave and pulse of mana, "come in, tell me where you've been. I've got some news as well and yes, I managed to get those damned runes working at last."

"Really? All right," she threw an arm over his shoulder, keeping pace as he tried to deny a smile, "I knew there was a reason I liked this place. Nice area, company's not too bad and out the way of any guild-related issues, though the lack of breakfast in bed's damaging its reputation - oof!"

"If you want that sleep in the kitchen," Jace riposted as the fire mage shrugged off his dig to the ribs; even through her mail he had sharp elbows, "I assume you're hungry?"

"Feed me and I'll be your friend forever Jace."

"Wouldn't death be kinder?" It was his turn for a less-than-gentle nudge even if Chandra couldn't keep her face straight,

"No chance when I'm around, the blood-witch learned that the hard way. Is she giving you any problems at your Guildmeet-thing?"

"No; well, no more than the other representatives."

"Pity, I'd look forwards to breaking her other hand - still, no luck finding anything important but there's some news on Dominaria; someone's started a rush in the west, rumours of a moxen apparently…"

A while later, after feeding ravenous appetites for something other than trail rations and news of outside Ravnica respectively, the two were sat in the main hosting room of the townhouse, Chandra gently rotating the flat, polished red stone she'd once wanted to make into a phoenix before donating it to a better cause,

"Wow," though more an artificer than a traditional wizarding craftsman Chandra could appreciate the runes painstakingly carved over every inch of the mirrored surface, "you did all these yourself?"

"With the help of an etching tool of the Izzet yes; the League has been surprisingly helpful recently, doubtless they want something."

"When don't they? Still," she tossed the stone into the air and caught it, thinly amused at the sudden panic that flashed across Jaces' eyes, "glad to see the first stone of Pyronia was put to good use doing, uh, whatever it now does." Wrestling down a chuckle Jace reached over, Chandra passing him the stone from the chair now twinning his favourite one in the living room,

"I still can't believe you called it that - the poor plane never stood a chance."

"Nothing wrong with that name," she swivelled in her seat, legs over the arm rest as she faced him over her knees, "and you didn't go stupid over this; I gave you that rock on your word you wouldn't."

"I didn't and, thanks to this, I can prove it," Jace assured her, holding up the carved stone with its runes now glowing with mana. Chandra looked at it expectantly before the runes swelled, the mana within spreading out and suffusing the whole room and turning into something else, another room she recognised; *this is Jace's lab - am*

I in his body somehow? ; the glow faded and she looked across at him wonderingly,

"It stores and shares memories," he explained, "put the image in there with a flare of mana and it transmits them to everyone in close proximity, the more mana in the larger the radius. It effectively put you in the place of the one who had the transmitted memory, lets you see it as though you were them."

"Kind of like what you can do?"

"Kind of, though it's relatively crude at the minute, I'm hoping to improve it when I get a chance."

"Okay," Chandra digested this for a minute before shrugging, "just out of interest why'd you invent it? Boredom?"

"Hah, with my new role that's a distant dream - honestly getting the guilds to agree to anything is like trying to herd cats and even then you have to document it in triplicate to avoid the Azors spontaneously exploding."

"You know I have a perfect cure for paperwork…"

"Hence why I don't let you within five miles of the Guildhall; that and the fact I don't need you and that Rakdos freak-show trying to murder each other again."

"She started it," Chandra retorted, snuffing out a fire in her fist as she recalled that fight; *not to mention its aftermath - talk about wrong place wrong time even if it ended well* ; "even the judges said it was self-defence. Anyway a normal man would be honoured to have two women fighting over him."

"A normal man wouldn't get the blood-witch and the arsonist; lucky me," he caught the pillow aimed at his face and tossed it back, matching Chandra's scowl with a smirk before becoming more pensive, fiddling with the stone once more, "I had a visitor while I you

were gone, not someone I was expecting but she had news that concerns both of us and Vraska. How is she by the way; the offer to call in is still open." Remembering her sometime-assistant Chandra smiled fondly,

"She knows, I tell her often enough but she doesn't like crowds Jace; it's one of the reasons she's affiliated to the Golgari, it keeps her out the way. She's getting the hang of her spark now though, I've seen her 'walk on her own a few times and she's picking it up well enough."

"She had a good teacher," the mind-mage smiled and despite herself the firebrand had to look away, embarrassed at the praise, "though I still can't believe we were so close when her spark ignited; Exava was good for something at least."

"Other than firewood you mean," Chandra grimaced before dragging herself back on the topic of the other planeswalker, "either way she seems happy enough, I think - I don't know if she feels the same way we do and don't really want to ask. I know she feels the cold though - damn Cuddles."

"I still don't believe you call her that; I will ask when I see her and if you end up a statue afterwards don't come running to me," he warned, Chandra smirking at his challenge,

"No chance, her gaze paralyses every muscle you've got and you choke to death since you can't breathe. Ask all you want as long as I'm there; I'll fill in any embarrassing bits she skips over. Anyway, you had a visitor?"

"Yes, I did," Jace held up his carved stone again, the runes twinkling with his mana as Chandra sat straighter in her chair, "and I think it's best you see it for yourself."

The stamp came down for the last time and he placed the paper neatly atop the others,

"That's the last of them Lavinia; please file them off and dismiss everyone, then show our guest in."

"Sure you don't want me to stand guard?"

"No, I'm certain; this isn't Guild business. Get yourself gone for the night, I'm sure Tajic wouldn't mind seeing you off-duty."

"There's nothing going on between me and the Boros guild representative."

"Really? Shame," her glare would have made Rakdos himself whimper, "still get going and tell her to knock before she comes in."

The Azorius arrestor nodded and then stepped out, the door falling shut behind her. Nothing happened for a few minutes before it suddenly banged back open and another figure emerged, a woman whose stunning, porcelain beauty was matched only by the coldness of the eyes she locked onto his,

"Well, well," she drawled, her tone thick, poisoned honey, "you've done well for yourself Jace, though didn't I teach you it was rude to keep a lady waiting?"

"And when one calls I'll remember that advice," that shot told, her skin losing some of its normal pallor as he scoured her vanity, "what do you want?" She pouted, sultry as she stepped forwards,

"So cold - is that how you treat your friends? And we," the tip of a pink tongue raced over her full, inviting lips, "were more than just friends once."

"We were," the emphasis on the last word stopped her dead, "and if you're here to waste my time as well as yours I want no part in it - what do you want Vess?"

For the first time there was a slight uncertainty in her step, a crack in the facade swiftly papered over as the black mage dropped a lot of

the pretence and spoke to him directly,

"No Lili - you wound me Jace. I waited for you when the Consortium collapsed, I would have followed you; don't blame me for your cowardice. Even now I've come with a warning and you spit in my face." The scene changed slightly, Jace standing behind his desk,

"Tell me I don't have good reason to tread softly around you necromancer; you're a user Liliana, you put no-one above or before yourself. You say you have a warning and you could be telling the truth but even if you are it won't come free. Let's hear it then," he retook his seat, "what do you know that would have me ring alarm bells in Ravnica?" Hair as black and luxurious as midnight cascaded as the cruel woman shook her head, still smiling like a cat,

"Ah yes, the keeper of the Ten, the law made flesh, the Living Guildpact; you accuse me of using Jace? Take a good, hard look in the mirror - Tezzeret and Bolas had a cadre of us dancing like puppets but you dangle a whole plane from your fingertips; they taught you too well. Still we had something once, there was a time I did care for you; because of that I amused your little revenge," her dress scarcely whispered as she stepped up and lay a sheaf of paper before him, "tell me if you recognise any of these names."

He scanned the page quickly and despite himself couldn't disguise a faint jolt of recognition, something Liliana was smirking at when he looked up again,

"I know some of them, including my own - blackmail targets, or ex-lovers perhaps?" The smirk dropped from her face and the air grew chill, a dark nimbus forming around her head as his words hit home,

"Don't test me boy," her voice was as cold as the grave, "I don't need you breathing to serve a purpose Guildpact."

"What purpose death-mage; I assume these names are all planeswalkers? Why bring it to me, especially since we're both on it?" Liliana's smile was a razors' edge as she picked her list up again,

"I tracked these down after 'walking half the Multiverse Beleren; appreciate my thoroughness if nothing else; but I wasn't the first to put them together. Something or someone knows all our names and has made a common thread between us, one I want severed along with the neck of the one responsible. I intend to find all these planeswalkers and discover the link but that won't happen if I have to track them down individually - how many people could we know between us across the Multiverse?"

"You think someone's what, after us for some reason?" Something he didn't recognise flicked over her expression, gone before he could analyse it properly,

"Maybe, maybe not; do you want to take the chance? I've not heard from Bolas in a while, it's been too quiet for too long when that serpent and his pets are concerned."

"I wouldn't risk being caught unprepared," he admitted, "so this is your warning to us all? Very generous - what do you want as thanks?"

"From you nothing and it's no warning Beleren, I've done some research into this, affair and it can't be solved by me alone. There are too many variables that could connect us, even the dead wouldn't know them all. We need a central point, somewhere all those involved can have their say and someone, probably you, can find the one responsible for this… we'll call it a travesty for now."

"A conclave?" His voice was flat with shock; apart from the Infinite Consortium he'd never heard of such a thing, "You want to call, what, a council of planeswalkers?" She laughed, a low, cold noise,

"No I've already begun to call it - I know some of these names and am seeking the others. Four months by the regular calendar should be enough to track the rest, especially with you on my side."

"Why should I help you?"

"Where do you think I told them our gathering would take place?" Even as mana tinged his vision blue she laughed again, setting the list down again with a few names scoured through by her nails, "We must find them by the Dominarian longest day; make the arrangements if you would? I'm sure the Guildpact can afford to be a generous host." He breathed hard once, twice than calmed himself; he might have been caught blind but he refused to be baited,

"Get out," he demanded coldly, "it will be done but I warn you if harm comes to Ravnica from this none of the demons you've sworn to will stop me finding you. I will leave you with nothing Liliana, I will strip your memory bare however long that might take." She hissed like a scalded cat before recovering her poise, leering forwards seductively,

"I remember when it wasn't my memory you were desperate to strip bare Jace Beleren; still, those were different times," she turned to go, midnight dress swishing like the last moans of a ghost, "I'll see you in four months, you and the others." Jace said no more, waiting until she left before sitting down and scrutinising the list again, his vision flicking between three of the names as he chewed his lip in concern…

As the glare faded Chandra caught her breath and sucked her gnawed bottom lip; *memories really are nothing to be messed with* ;

"You can see I had a good reason to get this stone ready," she had to reel herself in to hear Jaces' voice again, "I hope you can see my concerns though."

"See them? Yeah but that really did feel weird; I heard and saw everything you did but I couldn't feel anything you were feeling; that was Liliana Vess?" He nodded, still ashamed at that part of his life and the loses that had gone with it; it had taken a lot of trust to confide even to Chandra about his time in the Consortium and, true to her promises, she didn't tease him about his former flame; *well, not too much* ;

"First time I've seen her in years and she goes and drops this in my lap," he groaned, pulling a scrap of parchment from one of the pockets of his chair and passing it to her, "in less than a third of a year ten other planeswalkers are going to descend on this place and I can only imagine how well that's going to end. Apart from Liliana I know you, Vraska and no more so even with her help we're only about halfway there and with little idea where the others could be found."

"Well I know that one," Chandra chipped in, "Gideon Jura, did I tell you about him?"

"I wasn't a hundred percent sure until you said it," Jace admitted, mentally ticking off another name, "and I know the name Revane from an elven tribe of Zendikar so that's as good as any place to start." Chandra snickered slightly,

"All paths cross in that mess don't they? How long have we got before Dominaria's solstice?"

"Three months and some but I wasn't going anywhere without letting you and Vraska know. Liliana never said what she was doing this for but I'd wager either it's nothing good or the gathering's for her own ends somehow - either way I wasn't going to risk you running into her or this mysterious thing she's tracking down without fair warning. Especially since Vraska's not been 'walking long, it's been half a normal year since her spark lit - for Liliana or whatever she's following to know about her is worrying."

"And she keeps a low profile at the best of times," Chandra agreed, mulling this over; *can't think of anything or anyone who'd recognise her specifically, though if they knew I'm a planeswalker and saw us together they might put two and two together* ; "we're letting her know before we do anything else. Thanks for waiting and the warning but don't think I'm blind"; *what?* ; his confusion must have been evident as Chandra looked away with her nose in the air, "I saw as she was leaving your office; if your eyes had been any more glued on her backside they'd have followed it out the door."

"I was not looking, much," he was forced to admit under her sardonic gaze, "it's not my fault it's aesthetically appealing, and anyway Lavinia wears too much armour to get a good look."

"Oh I am so telling her that when I see her next; enjoy the Guildmeet that comes afterwards," Jace shuddered at the thought and frantically thought of a way to make amends before the firebrand made good on that threat, "so what's the plan? Vraska should have paid off her guild tithes in a few days, want me to tell her and go to Zendikar after this Revane?"

"Not exactly; I want us to go to Zendikar but Vraska can come if she wishes"; Chandra's head snapped around so fast her neck cracked,

"What, as in us two? What about the guilds?"

"I can appoint a representative; if anyone complains they can take it up with me when I get back," he assured her, the firebrand genuinely beaming at the thought of 'walking with him again, "trust me, after dealing with that lot for the past few months I'm due some long-service leave!"

Some hours later, after they'd dined again and made plans about the mysterious task Liliana had set, the sound of a falling volume made Jace glance up and chuckle; *every time* . Though she never admitted it the strain of her travels always caught up to the pyromaster the first night back and this time was no exception, Chandra's breathing deep and even as the denouement she'd been reading lay where it had slipped from her hand. Setting aside his own volume the Guildpact turned his attention to his lap, slowly effervescing the large globe of warm water that rested there encasing his housemates' feet and few restorative herbs. The unusual soak was one of the rituals that had evolved between them, something that helped bind them together despite their time apart and he was grateful for it, even if he did have to put his foot down and say no occasionally regardless of how heartbroken it made her look. Slowly the liquid dispersed and he lowered Chandra's heels to the carpet, the red mage not stirring as

he stepped up to her chair and carefully slid his arms under her. Straightening with a soft grunt of effort Jace was careful not to tread on her book as he slowly trekked towards and up the stairs, a soft murmur of,

"I'm not asleep you know" not making him pause,

"I could tell by your breathing, you woke up on the first step," he assured her, Chandra smiling and tucking herself in as he rounded the landing corner,

"Just thought I'd mention it," she admitted, not opening her eyes until she felt fabric under her, the mind-mage laying her on her bed, "Jace?"

"Hmm?"

"What was Liliana like?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can see why you fell for her," her orange irises gleamed faintly in the darkness, "she's beautiful, got a way with words - you said she was born a noble? It shows."

"It did, in all the wrong ways as well as the right ones," as the Guildpact made to sit down she shifted over, lying on her side and listening as he vented, "she was, don't laugh but she was a flirt, a tease and I fell for it completely," it was a hard struggle but Chandra managed not to let out a peep, waving for Jace to go on, "I thought we could have it all, the Consortium, Ravnica, each other. But she was a traitor," he clenched his fist, old wounds aching despite the present he'd buried them under, "she took what she wanted and she didn't care, that's what really got to me. She was in the chamber waiting but even if I'd gone with her it wouldn't have lasted; I'd have just been another toy, something else to use until she found a better offer. But, even knowing that, leaving the Consortium and her behind was one of the hardest things I've ever done."

"Nothing hurts like love huh? Whoever said that never met the business end of a sural." Jace snorted at her frankness before regarding the other planeswalker curiously,

"Wasn't that Gideon's weapon?"

"Yes and it was bloody painful," Chandra complained, remembering those battles and their aftermath, "be interesting to see what he's been up to."

"With any luck we'll find out a few months from now; either we find him or Liliana does and she can be, persuasive." Despite her best efforts she couldn't hold back a smile,

"I'm sure; you can't spell necromancer without romance," the quip made Jace snicker before her next words turned him pale, "so, how many times did you strip that temptress bare?"

"Chandra!" He yelped, scandalised, "That was a long time ago and, it, er… she led me on!"

"Must have been hard for her," she was in a mischievous mood and Jace scowled, bracing himself, "a wiggle of the hips here, a pout there and you'd eat out of her hands, and anywhere else she wanted…"

"Enough," he clapped his hands to his ears, scarlet at the insinuations, "you're supposed to be helping me forget that old witch, not dredging up the worst of it!"

"Don't be nasty; just because she's neck-deep in black mana you can't call her a witch and you certainly can't call her old. She looked good enough to catch you at least."

"She always did have a fine eye for make-up," Jace admitted before snickering, "and you'd not be the first to suckered in by it. She's not as young as she'd like people to think she is."

"Really? What, thirty or something?" He did some mental maths,

"If I'm remembering right she'll be two hundred and forty seven three months tomorrow."

"What?" Chandra sat upright, horror-stuck, "That's impossible, she's pre-Mending?"

"She is and nothing's impossible when you deal with demons," Jace muttered darkly, recalling what little he knew of the pacts his former lover had made to maintain her beauty and power; *the price of vanity outside is rot within* ; "I didn't find out until later."

"I should hope not; eww, she's old enough to be your… really, really old great-grandmother; gods she actually could be an ancestor of yours! Are you sure she wasn't lying?"

"She showed me her family history, it was real enough."

"What was it, a cave painting; really Jace, couldn't get someone your own age so you went tomb-robbing?" He slapped a hand softly over her face and pushed backwards, the pyromaster still smirking as her hair hit the pillows,

"Shut up, I'm not proud of it. Get your head down, we'll get off to Zendikar soon and try to find some leads about what's going on; if nothing else the elves should be easy to find." Chandra nodded, sitting up again to unbuckle her slim pauldrons,

"As long as they don't ask us to stay for drinks; still, good night, don't let your near-dead lover bite."

"Why do I put up with you?" Jace asked Ravnica at large, leaning down to embrace her already knowing the answer; it was a hundred and one things up to and including saving his life during the Maze run, "Forget about her, with any luck it'll be months before she darkens this plane again. And anyway," she paused from slipping her

gauntlet off; *I know that tone* ; "even if she does have the backside you've got the legs to kick it."

"Ass," the insult lacked the venom it once held, "you best not fall behind on Zendikar Beleren or the last thing you see will be these legs walking away from you."

"Really? Good night Chandra, sleep well." He patted her nearest knee before departing and she watched him go the whole way; only when he shut the door did she sigh to herself, undoing her mailed shirt; *a collection of planeswalkers arriving here in a few months at the behest of Jaces' old flame and possibly another threat in the background - would a few months peace kill the Multiverse? Oh well, it's a chance to get Jace off the plane* ; that was a comfort, especially if she could convince Vraska to sit this one out; *just me and him rather than three of us, even if at least two of us would end up under one blanket knowing Cuddles. Just us two though* ; she shivered at the thought; *you never know what might happen…*

That not knowing, as a well as a tip-off from a weather-beaten source, was the reason that a few weeks later a large subterranean cavern suddenly echoed with a yell of shock; only years of combat training let the stumbling man catch his balance before he fell into the black water just before him,

"Aww, it's not as funny when you don't make a splash," a disembodied voice whined; recovering, the warrior intoned a swift word and glanced around, hand on the butt of his tri-bladed whip. His incantation worked, white mana rippling through the cavern and with a shimmer like a heat haze the concealment was broken, leaving the hieromancer to start at his assailant,

"Chandra Nalaar," he said slowly, recovering as the woman nodded, "how ironic; come here to find you and the opposite happens."

"You were looking for me? Not the Order still surely?" She was more relieved than she let on when Gideon Jura shook his head,

"I did a bit of digging at the Sanctum of Stars, found out more about what you'd stolen," his tone was frosty and she gave a reluctant shrug; *probably not the best idea for a former thief to go looking to someone who draws their strength from the law* ; "had to study it for over a year but it actually had directions for here on it, fiendish map though. I wanted to know what the whole thing meant." Chandra shivered,

"Believe me be grateful you never found out; why are you looking for Ula's temple?"

"How did you know I was after that?"

"Met a Kor fisherwoman, she said you took passage on her boat; how did you think I knew where to find you? She also said you picked up a stowaway on your travels; shake her off did you?" The white mage chuckled caustically,

"Ha, I can dream; I've a talent for finding waifs and strays as you well know," out of respect for his intervention at the Order of Heliud Chandra took the slight with reasonable grace, though she stepped back as his sural blurred the air. The odd whip cracked over the dark lake, lashing the water to a foam and flicking fat droplets everywhere as it retraced, Chandra nimbly dodging the shower,

"Hey, no need for that."

"Says the woman who just tried to dunk me?" Gideon cut back, wrapping up his whip as a small light became visible beneath the black water. It grew brighter and larger, carried up from the depths until it broke the surface, a dark shape just below it,

"What do you want?" A childish voice called through the darkness, "The big bad warrior need me to hold his hand again; I'm trying to make a breakthrough down here!"

"The only thing you're trying is my patience," Gideon rumbled back, ignoring Chandra's snigger, "get over here, there's someone I want

you to meet."

"They better not be muscling in on my treasure."

"Our treasure, I am getting a reasonable share for the past four months aren't I?"

"You'll get what you're worth," in the gloom Chandra was able to pick out someone swimming towards them, "probably a toenail or two; the statue's supposed to be big as me, flawless crystal."

"I'm sure," Gideon sounded somewhere between resigned and exasperated, similar to how Jace did after a long Guildmeet, "now mind your tongue; this is Chandra Nalaar and she's not as forgiving as I am."

"Liar," Chandra denounced her former gaoler as someone pulled themselves onto the shore, "I'm perfectly well-mannered when I have to be," ignoring Gideons' disbelieving cough the firebrand turned to the stranger now dashing water from her… fins? "so, who are you?" Gideon's palm met his face,

"You had to ask," he muttered, the irritant that had fallen at his feet some six months ago and become his reluctant protégé two months after that ignoring him and grinning,

"Get ready," the small creature, definitely not human, gracefully back flipped into the water with a splash, speaking as soon as she surfaced, "from the frozen poles to the boiling centre all Zendikars' oceans know my name," water rolled, a spout rising with her atop it, "I'm the voice of the deep, the leviathan-rider and mistress of the krakens. I'm the one who'll find Ula's tomb, restore her glory to the surface world and all will whisper the name of her prophet," the child leapt from her twister, landing gracefully on the shore with an arm thrust overhead, "Kiora, the Thundering Wave!"

Gideon running away was her first clue something had gone wrong; she turned around in time to see her water spout collapse forwards,

drenching her as she lamented,

"No, it was meant to explode into spray; don't laugh," she demanded, the strange woman in red with her hands on her knees trying desperately not to. Eventually regaining control Chandra stepped forwards, offering her hand to the sodden merfolk,

"Just keep practising; I'm sure it'll be perfect next time."

"Really?"; *just what she needed* ; Gideon felt a headache brewing; *more encouragement* ; "Thanks, you can have some of the treasure me and that lunk find."

"Which we were supposed to find four months ago thanks to your 'infallible' information, and weren't you the Breaking Wave last week?"

"Yeah but all waves break, I want to do something special," she riposted before glancing up at Chandra again, "how did you find us anyway, this place is supposed to be hidden?"

"I had a tip-off Ki… wait, your name's Kiora?"

"The Thundering Wave," the diminutive merfolk protested but Chandra was no longer listening, looking from a sheaf of parchment to the girl disbelievingly,

"Whoa, two for one; uh," she glanced at Gideon, "is she…?" Guessing her meaning as she indicated the pair of them the hieromancer nodded,

"Yeah, lit up a while ago, unfortunately; if she hadn't that squid would have eaten her and I'd not have wasted all this time on a wild goose chase."

"It's not a wild goose chase," Kiora rebuked with conviction before looking at Chandra anew, "wait, are you a planeswalker too?" The firebrand ruffled her head-fins, making her giggle,

"Bright little button aren't you - guess someone had to be the brains of the team. Yeah I am; Chandra Nalaar, the Brimstone Fury; hey, actually that's not a bad title. Listen I need to borrow him a second, we've got some things to talk about - that okay with you?"

"Help yourself, he's no use down there; swims like a rock."

"Thinks like one too"; *happy thoughts, happy thoughts - just because I want to dangle them both head-first in a bucket of hedron crabs doesn't mean I should* ;

"Got that right but I've got work to do. Be gentle with him, he cries easily."

As Chandras' laugher echoed around the underwater shrine the white mage took a deep, calming breath and adjusted his last mental image; *I should use scute bugs* ;

"I can tell we're going to be friends Kiora, this shouldn't take long." The mergirl nodded and dived without a sound, scooping up the light-stone she'd left on the bottom of the lake and swimming for deeper water. Chandra watched until the shining disappeared and then turned to the older planeswalker,

"She's young."

"Too young," Gideon said softly, tracking her fading wake, "it was a temple like this, a dead-end with a kraken at the end of it. Didn't see it until it grabbed her underwater; I honestly thought she was dead then felt her ignite. I finished it off and followed her trail, brought her back to Zendikar; been keeping an eye ever since."

"She's lucky you were there Gideon, you're a good man," she told him without shame or embarrassment, time and experience letting her see the past she'd shared with him through a prism other than reckless anger, "what about before, she barely looks old enough to be without her family."

"I don't know, haven't found the right time to ask; she cries in her sleep sometimes," the hieromancer admitted, grateful to have someone who understood close enough to listen as Chandra, no stranger to nightmares, felt a whelm of pity for the mergirl, "I don't want to push too hard. I'm teaching her basic magic but I'm not great at shaping mana and there's no way I'm letting her use a blade, I barely trust her with a hammer and chisel."

"I thought you law and order types starting training young?" Chandra probed teasingly as the bigger man rolled a glowering eye over her, "How did you meet?" Despite himself Gideon snickered,

"Well…"

It was a beautiful day to be at sea; if it hadn't been for the harrowing accounts he'd read and been told he'd hardly have believe this plane had once been one of the most fractious and dangerous in the Multiverse. He'd had no luck finding Chandra's trail, not that he'd ever held out much hope for it given the time it had taken him to investigate the sanctum she'd raided and translate the plane of origin as Zendikar, but the place was pleasant enough and the old ruins, dungeons and temples around the place allowed him to keep his skills sharp. With the Order gone he had no-one to report to and, feeling at a bit of a loss, he'd been looking for a boat across the Waterveil and luckily one of the Kor had needed an extra hand with her nets and would see him across if he pitched in with labour and a few coins, a fair price and, as the blue-skinned woman suddenly hauled at a now-twitching line, a stroke of good fortune as well,

"Bigger than I was expecting," the blue-skinned woman said worriedly as he grabbed the rope, "there's gaffs by your feet if we need them."

"Got it," he called back, hauling the sodden rope in arm over arm and grateful as it came up rather than the other way around - there were worse things than sharks down there so he'd heard. The hemp slid easily over the side of the boat, Jhon'ee leaning over to snag the

top of the net as it appeared, Gideon helping her heave it to the deck,

"Ouch!" That was unusual; in his experience fish didn't complain, "Blundering landlings, get me out this damned net!"

"Bah," the Kor declared, spitting over the side of her small coracle, "fishing for kraken and we caught a sprat - urgh! A bad-tempered one too," she declared as the creature let out a jet of water, soaking a leg of her trews. Uncaring of the chill she hefted the net off the floor and, peering over her shoulder, Gideon saw a small finned face glaring defiantly back,

"Let me out - you have no right…" The voice was cut off as her captor shook the hempen prison and spoke over her,

"I think you'll find I've got a lot of rights merfolk, these aren't your hunting waters. You know what I do with rude sprats? I dangle 'em by their fins from the mainbrace until they learn better manners, or the birds start pecking 'em."

"Just try it, I'll get free and send this flotsam to the bottom. Hey, no, lemme out!"

"Wait," Gideon felt moved to interject as the Kor made to throw her catch, net and all, back into the ocean, "she won't drown will she? Never had much to do with merfolk."

"This one? We should be so lucky but a ride behind us 'til sunset might teach her to behave."

"No; listen," the trapped merfolk finally showed a bit of humility, "I'm sorry but I wasn't fishing, I'm just crossing the Waterveil."

"Alone?" Gideon guessed this wasn't a good thing by the alarm in the captain's voice, "That's a long way."

"Not for me, I'm the Rushing Wave sweeping across Zendikar," despite himself the hieromancer let out a chuckle; he'd been young once and remembered such boasts all too well,

"Not here you're not; turn around and go back to shore."

"No," the merfolk remained defiant, "look, let me out of here and put me down, your arms must be getting tired." The Kor chuckled, admiring her captives' pluck and not hearing her temporary first mate move until he spoke,

"Let her go please Jhon'ee," she looked over her shoulder at him quizzically but in the face of his calm assurance did as she was bid, the stowaway on her feet before them a few seconds later,

"Thank Ula for that; you landlings should know you need seaweed for a decent net by now, rope's too rough for the fish."

"Not for you though sprat; you're heading across the water right?"

"Yeah; just let me catch my breath and I'll go."

"You'll not, you'll never make it," Gideon stepped in, facing down the merfolks' petulant face stonily; Jhon'ee had guessed it would take then two days if the tides were good and it was barely midday of the first now, "how much for her passage?" Defiance flowered into disbelief, an odd expression on the semi-human face,

"Keep your money Jura, she'll pay her own way," disbelief curdled into horror at the items thrown at her finned feet, "start scrubbing and don't stop 'til every fleck of salt's gone. Don't even try going over the side, I'm a dead-eye with a harpoon."

"But…" She looked at him beseechingly but, backed up by the law he drew strength from, Gideon nodded,

"That's firm but fair."

Scowling the Kors' catch ducked the rough brush into the bucket, muttering under her breath as she started scouring the small ship from stern to fore. The sun was sinking when she was done, left far too tired to swim and falling asleep in a hammock made from a torn net and Gideon's spare cloak, the white mage with an eye on her as he declined the offer to share Jhon'ees' pipe,

"Kiora huh?"

As the story ended Chandra nodded then swatted his arm,

"Sounds like the sort of thing that happens to you - look on the bright side, no vampires this time."

"Very true, now what did you want Chandra and how is Jhon'ee; I assume she told you about us?"

"Never got her name but blue skin, tattoo of a sunrise on her left shoulder?"

"That's her."

"She's fine, something I hope we'll all be in a few months though after meeting Kiora I'm beginning to doubt it," hearing her tone change Gideon paid closer attention, reaching for his sural subconsciously as she held something out to him, "recognise any of these?" He scanned the list then snatched it away, looking from it to her,

"How did you know her name?"

"Same way someone knew about Vraska, she's only been lit a few months longer than your little helper; something strange is going on. I'm on Ravnica a lot of the time now and that list was delivered to a friend of mine three weeks ago. As far as we can work out it's naming planeswalkers but whoever found it isn't telling us where it came from - ever met Liliana Vess?"

"Never heard of her." *That'll be a fun introduction* ; Chandra could just picture how those two would likely get along, especially if he discovered the dark pacts Jaces' former flame was supposedly involved in,

"She's the one who handed out that list but she's keeping the reasons close to her chest. She's calling a council of planeswalkers, all of us marked according to her; she's promised to reveal everything she knows there. It's set for the longest Dominarian day at the Guildhall in Ravnica's Tenth District; we're trying to find as many on this list as possible and get them there, can you and Kiora make it?"

"Ravnica Guildhall, the longest day," Gideon repeated, committing it to memory, "yeah we'll be there; someone knowing about new sparks is likely bad news and Kiora's hardly been out my sight since hers ignited. Better keep her on a tighter leash, hell as that might be for my peptic health."

"She can't be that bad," a piercing look made her try a different tack, "worse than me?"

"There's not much in it; speaking of which what have you been up to recently - what made you settle in Ravnica?"

"I haven't settled - it's just my base of operations, somewhere to go back to you know?"

"I can guess; who's the lucky man? Wait, really - that was a shot in the dark." Even an angel would have laughed as Chandra cursed her inability to keep a straight face,

"Not a word," she demanded, embarrassed, "it's not serious." He only chuckled harder,

"Don't lie to the law-man Chandra; I'd have to flagellate you in penance."

"You even try and all the water in this temple won't put you out, I'm not the hot-head I was years ago Gideon," she told him, ironically just as her hair began to crackle, "you'll meet him at the conclave, he's trying to find someone else here. Don't suppose you know any of those names we haven't marked off yet?" The hieromancer shook his head,

"Sorry no idea, but you're over halfway. We'll see you on Ravnica Chandra, unless you'd like to go diving with that little menace?" The pyromancer smiled,

"Nah, sorry; I can tell you something though," she grin approached impish levels as she leant forwards, "your crystal princess is in another temple. Jhon'ee told me," she explained, remembering the Kor sailor she and Jace had met on the way to Halimar, their first port of call to both fulfil Jaces' promise to Hergig and find out about the Revane elves, "each of these temples is false, just leads you to the next. She's one of the few who've done the whole lot, followed it right to the end. She wouldn't tell me what was there but that's why she got her tattoo, reminds her not to follow a false dawn. Well, have fun on your chase."

Cow ; as the pyromancer departed Gideon could only sigh - this was typical of his luck. No sooner had he found something worth his time and effort something else came up he had to deal with, only this time he wasn't in it alone as a splash alerted him to company,

"Are you done yet?" Quickly side-stepping the jet of water that came lancing out the lake he tuned in to hear his pupils' indignant answer,

"No I'm not, there's a lot of rock down there; it'll take all day to shift."

"Just make sure you look at the whole wall first, last thing I need is for this whole place to come crashing down."

"I know; where'd the lady go? Did you scare her off already?"

"It'd take more than me to scare her off fishy; spit water one more time I'll hold you up by your tail 'til your feet touch the floor," he warned and, remembering how sacrosanct he held his word she fell silent, "get back below unless you want to abandon this foolish quest of yours, I've got some thinking to do."

"That'll take longer than my quest," she quipped, vanishing under the water as he skipped a stone in her direction, not seeing the concern that flickered over his face; *she's too young to bear her spark* . Only when he'd seen the devastation dogging the pasts of his contemporaries, Chandra not least amongst them, had he realised how lucky he'd been that his mentor had trained him with the expectation he'd awaken his potential; *and Kiora could have been the same, awakened by grief or terror with no-one to help, and now something else might be stirring as well. Not on my watch though* ; swearing that mental promise he stood tall, wrapping his tri-bladed whip around his arm; *whether it comes from Zendikar or outside or even this meeting, not on my watch.*

The stone in her pocket was heavy, a handy counterweight to the butterflies in her stomach as she led the way through the mostly-deserted streets. It was too early for most of the metropolis to be up, something Chandra's travelling companion was most grateful for even if she stuck to the shadows as much as possible, her life amid the Swarm and its lessons in laying low hard to forget in a place where most people feared her,

"Hurry up Vraska," the pyromancer called, realising her friend had fallen behind again crossing a large street, "sooner we're there sooner this whole mess is over; gods know how Jace got up so early."

"It is not that early Chandra," the gorgon replied as she stepped swiftly across the open space, the symbiotes she had in place of hair twitching as they scented the air for danger, "I will be glad to see this over however; I don't like large crowds."

"You'll be fine; trust me if the others we're seeing here today are anything like me you really won't be out of place."

"I could be afraid or amused by that remark," Vraska commented, her tone stony, "I am undecided."

Glancing at her friend Chandra bit back a sigh; though she'd known the gorgon several months now she felt little nearer to understanding her than she had the first time they'd met under, to Vraska, a strange and scary sky. Her mind operated on a slightly different frequency; something she, like most planeswalkers, had soon picked up on her travels was that the other races in the Multiverse were not humans with funny-coloured skin or pointed ears. What to her might be barbaric, such as a goblins' penchant for eating his dead neighbour was, to the goblin, perfectly reasonable; why waste a good meal? Thus it was with Vraska; her mind was a cool, calm and infuriatingly logical engine seldom trumped by emotion as hers was; only in the face of true peril or desperate fear had she heard the gorgon so much as gasp. She did things humans might find strange but, for her, made sense, such as minimising her time amongst others who feared her to avoid trouble; *even when she does nothing to justify it. She can kill with a look but I've looked her in the eye plenty of times, she can easily control it - I just wish these idiots would understand that* ;

"Probably best to be both," hiding her musings she reached back to grab her friends' hand, the smooth snake-skin dry under her fingers, "at least until they get to know you a bit better. Once they find out you're a hugger I'm sure you'll get on fine." She was dragged to a dead halt as Vraska suddenly stopped, the gorgon a lot stronger than she was and her grip like a constrictor's coils as the firebrand smiled worriedly; *might have gone a bit far with that one* ;

"Please don't mention that," Vraska's tone was pleasant enough but as her living hair began to writhe Chandra hastily nodded; though not the nest of snakes attributed to legend she'd seen what Vraska's symbiotes could do often enough to give them a healthy respect. Satisfied the gorgon let her go and they made their way swiftly

towards the inner reaches of the Tenth district towards the Guildhall, where the conclave of planeswalkers would soon take place.

It had been a hectic three months getting ready and after their stroke of luck on Zendikar they'd found no others; it would be up to Liliana to bring the ones they hadn't met to the gathering. As they'd discussed the previous night Jace had already left before Chandra awoke, the Guildpact moving to ensure the hall was ready and, if necessary, snuff out any trouble between the arriving travellers but as the Guildhall hove into view and she saw the hazy figures hovering by its doors Chandra realised he was no longer alone,

"Damn ghosts give me the creeps," she spat under her breath. It was one of the few things she didn't like about Ravnica - as far she was concerned the dead should stay dead, hence why she wasn't looking forwards to meeting the woman she'd only seen through Jaces' eyes up until now,

"Where do they make you creep to?" Vraska asked innocuously and, damn her snake-like face, Chandra couldn't tell if she was pulling her leg or not,

"In here for a start," the red mage stepped through the departed flanking the doorway to the Guildhall like sentinels, ignoring their moans demanding her name, "stick close to me Vraska, anyone starts anything they'll have to go through me and Jace first."

"I'd stop them before they impaled you," the gorgon assured her and this time she did smile, revealing the tips of her pointed fangs as Chandra snorted, patting one of her flattened symbiotes,

"Glad to hear it; now if I'm remembering this right it should be this way."

"We're trusting your memory? I can see why we left early."

"You sarcastic snake; no cuddles for you next time we're off this plane."

"I apologise."

"Alright then - let's go."

Luckily Chandra's memory didn't let them down and they soon emerged into the main conference room of the building, where all ten of Ravnica's guilds sent their representatives to simultaneously get work done and make their Guildpacts' life miserable. Eyes sweeping all over the place Chandra was relieved to see both Jace already waiting and no sign of his old flame, though even as she waved to the mind-mage a warning hiss made her look around,

"Vraska what - whoa!" Her gaze had missed something, or more accurately someone, a very large, exceptionally muscular someone. Just by looking she could tell he was a green mage of some kind; only one skilled in that kind of mana could make Gideon Jura look puny,

"Chandra, Vraska," Jace had vaulted over the table to come to her side, the three of them presenting a united front to the early arrival, "this is Garruk Wildspeaker; Garruk, Chandra Nalaar and Vraska." The stranger said nothing, regarding them all from under heavy brown eyebrows before, slowly, coming to his feet. His shadow lengthened and Chandra felt a bead of nervous sweat trickle down the back of her neck; he looked like he could snap all three of them in half with one hand and that was to say nothing of the huge axe he had strapped to his back, nor the old metal face-guard that hung at his belt,

"Good day," it was a thick voice, glottal from ill-use but surprisingly soft considering his almost inhuman physique,

"To you as well," fortunately Vraska answered for them, less intimidated than most people would be and keeping her head low out of politeness, "are you the first from outside Ravnica to arrive?" Talismans of claw and fang clacked softly as he shook his head, his thick mane of brown hair swaying,

"The rot-woman was first."

" *Liliana*," a silent voice whispered before Chandra could open her mouth, " *he's got a good sense of smell* ."

" *I'll bet*," she said back before focussing as he turned from the gorgon to regard her; she had time to notice his eyes were as brown as his hair before he pointed towards her waist,

"Why does one of red mana carry a stone?"

"Huh? Oh," as her fingers brushed something solid in her pocket she realised what he was pointing to; *he has got good senses* ; "this is a stone of memory; we thought we might need it for this." Garruk's eyes narrowed as she withdrew it and he held his hand forwards; at a nod from Jace she dropped it into his waiting palm. She felt the very faintest tingle of mana as he held it up, sniffing it suspiciously,

"Not from here."

"No, I found it on my travels," Chandra admitted, crossing her fingers he wouldn't ask where she'd travelled to find it, "I wanted to carve it into something but Jace had a better idea."

"What?"

"You can show other people your memories through it; just think about what you want to show them and channel as much mana as you can…"

"No," his low rumble cut her off, "what did you want to carve it into?"

"Oh, uh, a phoenix?"

"Bird of fire," Garruk nodded, offering her the stone back pinched between two of his massive fingers, "would have suited it. When does this start; I came because the rot-woman said we were being hunted; are we meat in her snare?" Jace laughed nastily,

"Possibly, knowing her, though she's made herself part of the bait by being here. I imagine this gets started when the others arrive, though when that might be or how many are coming I don't know." Garruk snorted, nodded at them and went back to his seat, sitting down and glowering at the walls as around him as Chandra felt a hand on her elbow,

"This way, Liliana labelled our seats for some reason; Vraska you're sat over there."

"No she's not," Chandra spared the arrangements a glance before tossing them out, quickly scouting the assembled tables and swapping two of the neatly-folded pieces of paper over, "there you go, next to me." The gorgon didn't say anything but Chandra guessed she was grateful, as was she when she was a fair distance from the man-mountain opposite and Jace sat down next to her,

"Miracle of miracles you can be polite."

"Yeah, when someone's got wrists thick as my…"

"Thighs? Okay no more jokes," the mind-mage assured her, clutching the ribs she'd just elbowed, "not seen Liliana yet but Garruk arrived just after me. I get the feeling he doesn't like crowds either - he and Vraska should get on like a Gruul bar-brawl."

"You're sure she's here?"

"Sure as the Orzhov are going to be clamouring for an explanation and payment next week," the Guildpact groaned, not looking forwards to that meeting with the long-dead leaders of Ravnica's church, "those wraiths she's using as doorkeepers are definitely theirs and none of their congregation are used without their say-so. She'd better have means to make amends."

"That she had, I wouldn't wish busting those old ghosts on my worst enemy, apart from you obviously," she snickered at his wounded look, "you brought it on yourself oh Living Guildpact."

"Would you rather have been reduced to dust by Azor's Verdict?" He riposted, winning the bout before lapsing into silence for a minute, watching as the fourth planeswalker in the room summoned some kind of weasel as long as his arm. After purring to it in beast-speech the animal lay across his arm and he began to stroke it, falling into a meditative silence.

As expected there was a bit of a wait before anything else happened, the odd enslaved ghost drifting through the walls the height of entertainment until a door at the back of the Guildhall opened and, glancing across, Chandra found herself fighting down a sudden spike of aggression. In the flesh Liliana was even more coldly beautiful than she'd imagined, though as the necromancer narrowed her eyes Chandra refused to drop hers, meeting the harrowing gaze as she did most things, head-on,

"I arranged the seating," her voice oozed charisma like a beehive oozed honey, a sweet allure with a deadly sting, "with a purpose in mind."

"And I rearranged it," Chandra said neutrally, not breaking eye-contact with the much older 'walker, refusing to give her the satisfaction of reacting as Liliana's face twitched as though a nasty smell had just appeared under her nose, "so you can sort your purpose out from there."

"I could but why would I," a swooping chill at her back cooled even Chandra's fire and she shivered, the shade Liliana had called drifting past to exchange another two of the place names, "good help is so easy to find on this plane. Really Jace you'd settle for that - your standards truly have slipped."

The Ravnicans hand seizing her bicep was all that stopped her melting the smug smile off that pale face, though before either could answer another voice cut in, its frankness more powerful than any outburst,

"No further than your standards in dressing, even for a human," Vraska was regarding the stranger inscrutably, semi-living hair rising in annoyance, "you couldn't fight or run in that second skin." Vess's attention snapped to the gorgon, appraising as she looked the Golgari up and down,

"My-my, such interesting company the Guildpact keeps; a word to the wise gorgon, keep your forked tongue in your mouth when your betters speak lest they make their next second skin out of yours, and before you try," the necromancer's eyes were suddenly hollow, consumed by darkness as the mana of the swamps filled her, "if you think your killing looks will work on me you are sorely mistaken."

"But I'm not," Chandra grated, a flicker of fire snapping around her free hand, "either you drop your mana or I drop you. Please, I'm begging you, go for option two; I've a talent for making witches bleed." Lilana's dread gaze was less effective against someone who could meet it with flame, the two locking eyes and not backing down until a warning cough from Garruk brought the struggle to a stalemate.

Being ushered in by Liliana's unliving servants were three figures, one a man and the other two… certainly humanoid. They both had pale skin and long, hair of some sort bound up in elaborate patterns atop their heads - Chandra would have said Kor but their excessive height and lack of grapnels, to say nothing of the robes they wore, made that wrong. She flicked a look at Jace, the mind-mage nodding minutely and, reassured, she let his mental voice into her ear,

" *Soratami, from Kamigawa.* "

" *Of course they are*," Chandra could have kicked herself at the reminder, " *went there to get your record of their war didn't I? Never met one though, didn't know anyone from that plane could 'walk?"*

" *I think I've heard of one of them, the Moon Sage - don't ask me which one she is though. I don't know who the man is either but his*

name's Venser. It's the name where he's sat," he explained to her quizzical glance, " *Liliana must have found these three and Garruk* ."

" *Wonder how, she doesn't seem like the type to make friends*," he almost winced at her mental snarl, though he certainly didn't blame her for it, " *so, now we wait* ."

" *Looks that way* ."

Spaced out by the necromancers' seating plan there was little conversation between the scattered groups; only at another entrant to the gathering was anything said, Jace standing and bowing to greet the new arrival as he had several months previously,

"Revane," he said quietly, knowing her hearing was keener than his, "welcome to this home." The elf said nothing, taking in all before her before stepping forwards as noiselessly as a cat,

"Beleren," she didn't bow back, "is this conclave begun?"

"Not yet, you are the ninth to arrive. Please be seated, make yourself comfortable," the Zendikarian nodded again before, rather than looking for a seat, retreating to the nearest corner and leaning against it, her large, amber eyes continually darting over all the others assembled. *Zendikar* ; Jace could only hope none of the others took offence; *a plane that makes even goblins wary of ambush and treachery - I was lucky she even deigned to speak with me without riddling me with arrows.* He had few pleasant memories of that place and even fewer of its denizens; the elves that patrolled its remaining forests were xenophobic even for their kind and it had taken much bartering, luck and the odd cantrip to even gain an audience with one of their most powerful shaman.

Nissa, though he wouldn't call her that as a knife in the stomach often hurt, had the aloofness of all elves but also a wary streak a mile wide and a hair-trigger to danger; coupled with her formidable skills with a bladed staff and her strengths as an elementalist it was a dangerous combination. Even relaxed she, like Garruk, was ever-

alert, the odd Ravnican spirit that loomed too close quickly cut in half by the bladed staff, Jace wincing with every figure she inconvenienced as he saw the price of the Ghost Councils' silence going up before his eyes. *Well this is going swimmingly* ; not for the first time he cursed his younger self for ever getting involved in the Consortium and all those within it - Chandra excepted, he couldn't think of a single positive thing it had ever done for him; *and now this, trapped in a room with eight powerful mages and almost none of us know each other. I swear if Nicol Bolas comes crashing through the wall if it's the last thing I do I'm throwing Liliana into his maw and bidding him bon appétit* .

Fortunately the entrants that brought the gathering into double figures broke the mounting tension, Chandra hailing the duo and, coincidentally, banishing the fear that had one of them mostly hiding behind the other,

"Hey squirt, lead the lummox here okay?"

"Yep, told you to leave it to me," Gideon was left to fume silently as his diminutive apprentice abandoned him, scooting around the loose horseshoe of tables to where the firebrand sat, "and I'll give you squirt Brimstone; don't forget you're talking to the Tidal Wave."

"Thought you were the Thundering Wave; anyway thanks, you just reminded me of something," the mergirl's eyes widened as she let a small barrage of firecrackers out from her gauntlet,

"Wow, what was that?"

"A celebration; I finally met a planeswalker smaller than me."

"Hey!"

"Not by much though, you've shot up since I saw you last," the pyromaster went on before the younger planeswalker could get too indignant, "and never forget size doesn't matter - hit 'em where it

hurts and they'll drop no matter how big they are. Anyway less of that, how did your quest go?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," from the corner of her eye she saw Gideon, now sat down, rest his nose atop his hands to cover his smirk, "Ula can kiss my tail!"

"Bad as that huh - don't worry about it, plenty of time to make your fortune yet. These are two of my friends; Vraska this is Kiora, the Thundering Wave…"

"Tidal Wave," the mergirl corrected her before gazing up at the figure that looked over its shoulder at her, enthralled by the sight, "wow, is that your hair?"

"No," Vraska replied after a second, looking as bewildered as she had the first time Chandra had met her, "I do not have hair; they are symbiotes, part of me but separate." Kiora cocked her head, looking at the twitching mass as they scented her,

"How does that work? A sim-biote, never heard of them."

"They grow when we metamorphosise from base creature to gorgon," Vraska explained, not sure how to react to a child who didn't flee from her screaming, "after the birthing bite…"

"Uh Vraska, please don't give her ideas, I don't need any more children trying to run away and join the Simic," Jace pleaded, remembering the constant headache that guild caused whenever trespassers and truants got lost in their birthing pools and he was left trying to undo the damage in ways not involving vivisection, "hello Kiora, my name is Jace Beleren. Chandra told me about you and Gideon, it's nice to meet you at last." She glanced up at the Guildpact and cocked her head,

"Uh, she didn't say anything about you," as the mind-mage's ego was pricked Chandra coughed to disguise a laugh, "but if you're her friend you can't be too much of a worm."

"Kiora!" The authoritative bark made her jump as Chandra disintegrated, trying to apologise to her housemate as, hidden by his hood, he smiled a little as well; *I can see why the firebrand took a shine to you* ; "What have I told you about language? Get over here," any thoughts of testing his temper fled at the sternness in his eye and she quickly waved farewell to the Brimstone Fury, dashing around the table and pulling out a seat next to the hieromancer. All was quiet for a few moments before Gideon looked away and she turned to the person a seat over,

"Uhh, hi," she tried to whisper but the Guildhall had been designed to carry sound, otherwise none would have ever heard the Orzhov or Dimir delegates, Garruk looking across and down as she pointed at the furry body covering his far forearm, "is he, ah, friendly?" The beastmage shook his head but, as Kiora sat back disgruntled, he placed his hand upon the desk before him and growled, a small bundle of fluff visible when he removed it,

"He is," the hunter grated, tapping the rabbit on the rump while holding his weasel tightly about the neck to stop it going for his newest summon. The smaller creature got about four hops before the mergirl scooped it up, hoisting it into her lap and petting its ears as her mentor glanced over her to catch Garruks' eye. The two of them held a long, silent conversation before the hieromancer nodded and looked away just as another of the assembled stood up, facing the doorway with disbelief in his tone,

"Elspeth?"

"Venser?" It was a woman who answered, a woman wearing a spotless white robe bound by a sigiled clasp and with a sword scabbarded at her belt. Alighting the stairs quickly she was met by her old friend, the two clasping forearm to forearm as the artificer smiled,

"This is a surprise, and Koth as well," most eyes had been drawn to the figure who cast the woman he'd accompanied into shadow, the metallic plates interwoven into his skin making him stand out even

amongst the planeswalkers gathered together, "let me guess, you got the same message we all did?"

"A warning, of sorts," the geomancer confirmed, touching his knuckles to those of his friends in the traditional Vulshok greeting, "something or someone knowing many of us; this many?"

"So it would seem but you two are the last," the sojourner told them, looking at his old friends fondly as he remembered their trials together and the miracle that had saved not just their plane but his life, "take a seat, you're both over there next to the empty chair. I'll make introductions when this is over, I'd be glad to hear how you're remaking Mirrodin."

"We'll tell you everything," the former knight of Bant assured her old friend as she hunted for a seat, registering the others seated and ticking off their likely strengths in case this was a trap; she'd never before heard of so many sparks gathered in one place, and at the behest of a necromancer, "you best do the same though, it's been a long time."

"Too long but it's not been easy; my friends and I have had a, ah, pest problem for a while," the artificer admitted cryptically, the two soratami sharing an eerily knowing look even if one of them appeared blind, "still, we're all here bar one now."

"And that one," a luxurious voice purred from the head table as a sliver of midnight coalesced into being, the attention of several of the men drawn to the figure who emerged from it, "bids you welcome."

The tension was thick, magic all but striking sparks off the walls as the planeswalkers regarded each other and their supposed host smirking - she had a secret and relished the leverage that gave her,

"So then, here we are," she began, pacing up behind the high table at the head of the assembled seats, "thirteen of us who hold the spark, who walk the Multiverse and its worlds. There's never been

such a gathering, so many of us in one place but I've called you here to tell you this," she leant over the table, hair cascading from her neck enticingly as her next words cut the air like a bone-fletched knife, "we are all united by more than what we are. Someone else, who will soon be regretting their actions very deeply, has united us by mockery."

"Mockery," it was Gideon who spoke, disdain in his voice as he regarded the woman and all but tasted the taint of darkness on her, "words do little harm necromancer." Liliana laughed coldly,

"Ah yes, the power of the righteous to know their cause is just and good and noble no matter the cost. You likely think me a monster but riddle me this sun-mage; who puts in the ground what I raise from it? More innocents have been lost to justice than to famine, disease and disaster, think on that."

"Enough," it was Jace who spoke, already experienced with this kind of diplomacy, "accusations will get nothing accomplished. You swore this gathering had a purpose Vess so speak as you promised; what is it that threatens so many of us?" Liliana turned, looking at him for a long minute before, to his consternation, smirking,

"Seems you've fitted into your new role well Beleren, though for how long I'm not so sure once your precious guilds discover the other name you've been going by along with your, ah, belle."

Before he could question her or Chandra could decide if she'd been insulted or appraised the necromancer threw something towards them, something the Ravnican snatched out the air before he looked at it. For a blood-freezing second he thought he was holding something that had nearly broken him once but then the fear faded and he flipped the small novel over, glancing at the title utterly mystified. It possessed no aura of magic and appeared like any other of Ravnica's myriad penny dreadfuls,

"Jace is that us?!" Tearing his attention from the title, the words *Ice and Fire* superimposed upon a stylised H, he took in the cover and

blanched; the hair was different, the eyes were the wrong colour and Chandra wasn't quite that short next to him but there was no doubt who it depicted,

"It must be; what's…?" He stuttered to a halt, the first page making him blush puce as Chandra, reading over his shoulder, glared up at the necromancer furiously,

"Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Hardly, though doubtless someone finds it amusing," Liliana told her sweetly, "why so red Jace, surely you've seen it all before?"

"Seen it - no!" He spluttered, thumbing through the repulsive literature with building horror and outrage, "This is trash, absolute gutter-filth!"

"That's unfair, I quite enjoyed it," the dark mage twisted the knife mercilessly, "a young thief raids an old wizards' tower looking for his secret treasure only to find him more powerful and not quite as old as she was expecting, I'm sure you can guess where it goes from there. The, ah, risqué illustrations merely add to its best-seller quality, though I wonder where the author got his inspiration; perhaps you could enlighten us Sandra?" The fire mage stared at her, face redder than her hair,

"It's Chandra…"

"Not in there it's not," Liliana sing-songed, "as soon as that novel reaches its target audience I imagine Sandra Nailer and Caje Neberel will be more famous than the pair of you ever were."

Kill me, kill me now ; Chandra had been done by and pulled some pretty fast ones in her time but surely this took the cake. Hands over her face and peering through her fingers she looked past the smirking necromancer to those sat opposite, most of whom were regarding her with expressions somewhere between pity and gut-busting hilarity. With molten embarrassment all but squirting blood

out her ears and Jace beside her mortified all she could do was look up at the grinning black mage and beg to be put out her misery,

"Wait a minute," that wasn't her voice; she looked over to see Venser, if that was his name, looking around, "am I to assume we're sat as couples for a reason?" There was a second of absolute, perfect silence before with a crash someone shot to their feet,

"Oh hells no… !"

"No indeed," Liliana called over Gideon's denunciation, holding up another volume, "yours is the most touching of the lot, I almost shed a tear. Our 'hero' finds a young girl wandering the streets and, against his better judgement, takes her home - *Whip and Wave* tells how she muscles in on his life and puts the brakes on his, ah, womanising ways." The necromancer threw the novel over, Gideon flicking through it frantically and shuddering, his turn on the rack of humiliation then spun into overdrive as his supposed co-star, reading the back cover, looked up at him confused,

"What's a cock-block?"

The firebrand was just fast enough, teeth closing around glove as absolute hilarity shook her, vision fracturing into tears that showed her one-time nemesis redder than she was, one hand clapped over his face. Somehow Gideon stood tall and, after a long, deep breath, finally managed to reply,

"You're far too young to know and I'll flay anyone who tells you."

"I wanna…"

"You want to write out my rules again?" Kiora shook her head fearfully, "Then just stroke your rabbit," Jace slumped over hugging his stomach as Chandra's eyes bulged, biting her hand so hard it hurt; Gideon must have been unaware of the Ravnican slang, "who dared write this necromancer, tell me!" Liliana put a finger to her lip, teasing,

"Hmm, you look a little flustered hero," starting to recover from a combination of shock, horror, hilarity and, though he'd never admit it, a tiny iota of arousal (some illustrations of Ch… *Sandra* and-stroke- or Caje left very little to the imagination), Jace glanced up at his former lover with undisguised contempt; *she's arranged this to humiliate us all and get away with it herself - she must be in one of them, that's the connection between us all! But she can't draw to save her life - how did she find out about this, collection?* ; "how about something amusing? A young man inherits an ancestral mansion and finds it all too much for him, he advertises for some help and, wouldn't you know it, two young and pretty maids arrive on the same day to apply. He's too nice to fire either of them so sets them a challenge; the one who does the best job after a month he'll keep - to get the post, win his bumbling heart and get rid of their rival what lows will they stoop to, and will they be rivals by the end?"

"Are you making a point or a sales pitch - it's me isn't it, or us?" Venser said heavily, catching the novel tossed his way and wishing he wasn't sat between the two soratami, " *Sage and Rabbit* ; interesting title - oh gods," he looked away from the page it fell open at, "I've never had maids and if I did they wouldn't wear that!"

"I am glad to hear it," one of the soratami, the one with normal eyes replied; her voice was lilting, almost musical and could have frozen a bonfire, "you are an amusing companion Venser-san, I would not like to have our assassin friend extend his contract to your head as well."

"I didn't do this Tamiyo-san and you know that as well as I do; Kaguya-san are you all right?"

"I am," the blind-looking soratami answered as redness tinged her cheeks, "that looks, tight."

"It does indeed," Venser admitted, closing the novel with a slam before glaring up at the smirking master of ceremonies, "just get this over with; I'm sure there are at least two more."

"Three actually, but one you don't need to know about; *Sword and Hammer* about two old foes and love on the battlefield while this one, my personal favourite, puts a different spin on the 'monster-slayer' story. You may want to peel yourself away from your corner elf, this one involves you," finally recovering, Chandra was able to sit up just as her friend caught her own best-seller and flicked through the first pages, apparently disinterested before pausing and looking up,

"This is not well-informed; gorgons do not couple."

It was the dead-pan straw that broke the camel's back; Chandra howled with helpless mirth and heard at least two others do the same, one being Jace as the mind-mage collapsed face-down on the table, thumping it with a free fist. Falling against the snake-womans' shoulder and feeling symbiotes rustle over her hair and neck the firebrand laughed until it hurt and then, finally, heaved down some much-needed air,

"Vraska," she gasped, "promise me you'll never change - I think I just burst my spleen!"

"That would be unlikely," the gorgon answered before with a collective hiss her symbiotes rose, weaving out rapidly as the one who'd been trying to sneak up on her backed away, "it's polite to announce yourself." Wiping her eyes Chandra saw the feral-looking elf staring over her friends' shoulder, her better than human vision granting her a clear sight of the novels' contents,

"Whoever wrote this will die as punishment," Revane said, her tone almost as factual as Vraskas; elves, as far as the firebrand could remember, were either very good or notoriously poor at taking a joke and it seemed the Zendikarian fell into the latter category. Before she could puzzle this through any more a womans' voice cut through the hubbub,

"This is, childish but seems unworthy to call us all here," it was the caped woman who spoke, addressing Lilana with a calm but determined demeanour,

"Ah yes, yours is the cleanest of the six; however when the noble Hepslet Virile dreams of battle, or its aftermath, with her nemesis Thok the Rammer well, be still my beating heart."

"Even so this…" the knight trailed off as her companion tapped her shoulder gently with his partially metallic hands, passing her the part-way opened novel and unable to meet her gaze. She glanced down and double-took, snatching the publication away and holding it up to her face; when it dropped again a few seconds later it was a mercy the pages hadn't shrivelled from the heat of her glowing cheeks,

"I'm with the lady Revane," she whispered, "whoever wrote this, travesty dies."

"I agree, repeatedly if I get my claws into him."

"Why; I notice you've not nominated yourself and there's only one left to be your partner," Jace cut in, looking pointedly at the other unnamed party, "you were seldom one to show and not tell Liliana."

"Liliana now is it Jace - flattery will get you everywhere," Chandra's fists clenched but, seeing his expression stony, forced herself not to rise to the bait, "I'll admit I've been captured in ink just as you have; *Beast and Beauty* was my title."

"I see," Vraska said solemnly, glancing up from the novel she'd been quietly reading to look across the room, "hello beautiful."

Garruk gave a rumbling chortle, most of the others forced to glance away as Liliana stumbled before shooting the gorgon a terrible glare,

"Regardless of that it's not the books that made me hunt you all down; it's what the books represent. I don't know all of you and glad I am for that but something knows who we all are and, worse, who amongst us know each other, even if we've only met fleetingly."

"Or at all," Nissa cut in, "I've never seen the half-snake before."

"Nor I you, though this work may refer to another elf; Sisna is male and somewhat cowardly, you are neither even if you fear me."

"I fear little, you least of all," Vraska nodded then suddenly hissed, her symbiotes flaring up and casting both Chandra and the empty seat the elf should have been sat in into shadow. Nissa leapt back five feet without touching the floor as the gorgon settled, showing neither glee nor upset at proving her point as the elf reached for her spear,

"Hold please Revane," Jace requested, his hand raised in supplication, "she, like us, are ignorant to many of your ways, no offence was meant."

"But some might be taken if you don't sit down," Chandra chipped in, speaking up for her friend; *I've seen too many people treat her like a monster - not here and not now* ; "I've put my life in Vraskas' hands several times as she has hers in mine and we're both still here, what does that tell you?"

"You're either braver or more foolish than you look," the elementalist countered but she did, haltingly, approach and take her seat, though she was much closer to the Vulshok on her other side than she was the gorgon.

"As I was saying," Liliana's voice slewed the conversation back on track, the necromancer locking eyes on the squabbling rabble before and daring them to interrupt again, "we have all been found and humiliated in this manner. This raises the question who committed the offence, how it was done and for what purpose - I don't need Beleren to tell me none here are the culprit; we're all strangers to at least some of each other; so I took the liberty of having that question answered as well."

"How?" Liliana's throaty chuckle at Koths' question was both wicked and warming,

"Use of guile and trickery, things those touched by mountainous mana will never know," the Vulshok glowered, some of the veins under his metallic skin glowing at the snub, "use what brains you have - only planeswalkers, plural, could know all of us. Only another cabal such as the one I've called here could have both done this and set these volumes for sale throughout the Multiverse."

The collective intake of breath made the walls bow in; bad enough these copies existed, how many others could be out there?

"Wait," it was Kiora, least affected, who broke the silence, depositing Garruks' rabbit on the table in front of her to lean forwards, "you mean we're in these books everywhere?" The merfolk wasn't sure she liked the smile the pale woman gave her, and she really didn't like that Gideon was still aware enough to catch her hand as it inched towards the mysterious novel she was in,

"We are; for shame Guildpact, your intellect undermined by a mere child." Jace paled,

"Oh no," the thought made his blood chill, the proof of the printing mark made it freeze solid,

"Oh yes, though I had to pre-order these; they go on sale a few weeks from now," vindictive to the end Liliana took great pleasure in seeing someone who'd denied her wriggle and squirm, " how would your precious guilds take to finding their mediator has a double life as an erotic muse I wonder?" Jace buried his head in his hands, only just feeling Chandra's arm on his shoulder in support,

"The Orzhov, the Dimir; I'm doomed, utterly doomed," he sat bolt upright as something worse filtered through his mind, "this'll be in every Boros garrison in a month! That's it, let the Verdict happen; I'm leaving the plane!"

"You always were good at running away," Liliana mused cruelly, not affected by the combined glares of Jace and the commoner he'd found in her absence, "but don't go anywhere yet; I, as a 'devoted

fan', have been in touch with the publisher. Because of my persistence one of the authors has agreed to appear at this Guildhall to address the 'president' of his Ravnican fanclub and her 'loyal supporters' for a private book-signing. He'll be here in about an hour," everyone swapped glances, some alarmed, some concerned and many murderous, "I suggest we arrange a suitable reception."

Given the amount of magic and experience present within the Guildhall it came as no surprise that within ten minutes the place was a death-trap, impossible to 'walk out of and filled with layers of mana-plaited traps and snares. Apart from Garruk and Vraska, who seemed little concerned about the issue at hand and Kiora, who couldn't help and spent most of the time introducing herself to any who'd listen, the remaining planeswalkers bent their strength to preparing to capture whoever had heaped this humiliation on their heads. Few words were exchanged though, acting as a medium, Venser was reintroduced to those who'd stood beside him on Mirrodin, telling them of his adventures since and glad to hear the plane was healing its scars, as well as a few other surprises,

"Married Koth, or compounded I should say?" He exclaimed, looking the Vulshok up and down, "That I wasn't expecting."

"Why not - I compounded with Nurthu for peace amongst the tribes and to raise Tiszta," a short pause followed that name, as it always would between those who knew her mysterious origins, "she's growing well, Elspeth has promised to train her when she is of age."

"If she wants to," the knight cut in, evil memories flitting behind her eyes regarding the fate of her other squires, "she'll have to be a bit older before she earns her sword. Melira's looking after her along with Nurthu." Venser smiled; *seems the nightmares might be fading for you after all Elspeth* ;

"Glad to hear it, though don't think I've forgotten that mask you put me in metal-man," the sojourner warned, Koth looking away guiltily despite his smirk, "though before we hash up those embarrassments

these are Tamiyo, who I met after a spot of bother with my journal, and Kaguya who joined us later." Soratami, human and Vulshok regarded each other warily, the barriers of unfamiliarity not easily breached but, eventually, making cool but cordial headway as the old friends reunited and told of new adventures. Meanwhile Jace and Chandra, the former having sent a small wisp to keep a lookout at the front of the Guildhall, were sat side by side uncomfortably; Vraska was occupied with Kiora's questions and Gideon watching over his young charge and there was only one thing that could help them kill time,

"Well," she broke the ice first, lead in her tone as she dragged the book over to them inch by inch, "let's see just how bad this - oh that's it," even the first picture made her insides writhe, "whoever did this burns the second after he tells us where his friends are!"

"I agree," her housemate backed her assumption up, barely able to glance between the sequential illustrations and the woman at his side, "though just out of curiosity do you have a birthmark?"

"Not on my hip, got a scar though; why didn't he just draw her in a belt and have done with it?"

"Page a hundred and fourteen…"

"I didn't ask you," Liliana retreated, hands in the air and smirking as the younger planeswalker braced herself, took a breath and turned the page.

In all honesty it wasn't, as they would admit years later, quite as bad as they'd feared; there were several bits that made them snicker, quite a few that made them laugh and one or two that really resonated. The revelation of Neberels' 'treasure', the memory of his wife and the daughter she'd died in labour with, brought a lump to both their throats as did the scene where Sandra threw herself from the top of his tower, forcing her antagonist to choose between leaving the sanctuary he'd sworn never to abandon following their deaths to save her or letting her die. It even had a happy ending, the

two of them and Kaput, Neberels' familiar, walking off into the distance hand in hand,

"Though that does," Jace said forebodingly as he looked at the inside back cover to see the other titles available, "leave it open for a sequel."

"Not when I get through with the writer," Chandra assured him, scanning the small pages and ticking them off with the assembled planeswalkers; *they're all roughly right, you'd have to look twice if you saw us in the street but whoever did this knew what we look like* ; "where is this guy anyway, I want to burn more than just his books!"

"Are they really that bad?" Jace hastily stowed the publication out of sight as a small head surfaced beside the table, craning for a peek,

"Yes they are and if I see you trying to read one again I'll get Garruk to set his weasel on you."

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me," Kiora glared up, Gideon glared down and Chandra snickered at the pair of them,

"How did you two survive Zendikar? Anyway Gideon this is Jace Beleren, or Caje…"

"Thank you," Jace cut her off, standing and nodding in greeting to the bigger man, "a pleasure master Jura, Chandra told me much about you."

"I'll bet she did; the embarrassing bits?"

"Some of them," Jace said wheedlingly, the hieromancer smirking a little as he realised the Ravnican's game, "but all in good fun."

"If you want to see something funny show her something big with between seven and nine legs," Jace nodded, face carefully blank as his housemate scowled, pricked by the reminder, "just make sure

you've got water ready; her 'kill-it-with-fire' reaction tends to be on a hair trigger with them around."

"When isn't it? No, that's unfair," Jace cut off the teasing before the pyromancer could grow truly irate, "we've both changed a lot, much of it for the better."

"Lucky you, wish this one would," Gideon muttered, the merfolk sticking her tongue out at him before speaking to Vraska again, "so what's this Guildpact you've got on… what was that?"

Everyone fell silent as the small tremor passed through the ground, a click of wood against stone bringing all eyes onto Nissa as she rapped the butt of her spear against the floor,

"He comes," she growled from her corner, having retreated there following setting a few wards of her own. Her certainty was confirmed a moment later Jace and the others who'd left guardians or alert spells on the entrance to the Guildhall. As they retook their seats, Liliana again behind the head table, she found herself hailed by the Guildpact,

"Dismiss them."

"Dismiss, who?"

"Don't play coy, it doesn't suit you," Jaces' voice was cooler than the mana he tapped, "the Orzhov, let them away from here. If this breaks into warfare I want none save us in the crossfire."

"Since when did you care for the dead?"

"Since they came under my protection, now unbind them before I do," Liliana's purple eyes crackled with challenge before she shrugged, releasing her hold over the spectres she'd held sway over for the morning, the effort so trivial she'd all but forgotten she'd done it,

"As you command Beleren; perhaps being a living document is doing you some good. You were never this forceful before; that's attractive in a man."

"To you maybe but I prefer being what I am; it lets me hold on to what I've got"; Chandra felt a rush of gratitude for the blue mage, flipping the necromancer off under the table as Liliana glared at her and Jace took his seat again .

"Remember everyone," Koth was speaking, heat shimmering from his gently-venting metal patches, "interrogate *then* do away with."

There were a smattering of chuckles to this, the assembled planeswalkers preparing for their invited guest and not once considering that their wards, shielding the meeting room, were being circumvented even as they sat down. Once more it was Nissa who reacted first, spinning her spear into a guard stance just as Garruk straightened, his hunting beast likewise going rigid as it felt its masters' concern. All waited with baited breath, eyes trained on the opened doors and with spells on their lips just as a faint noise tickled the edges of their perception. It grew louder and louder, a definite rattling preceding the figure who burst through the door slightly before they were all ready,

"My adoring fans, ready for your signing are you? In a line then, ladies first… ah, you're not my adoring fans are you?"

" *You!* "

"And you're certainly not the president of my fan club, nor are you a lady."

Attention was torn between the figure at the doorway and the terrible gargoyle hunched over the table glaring at him. Liliana's cultured poise had been stripped away; her eyes were blazing purple, her once-inviting lips withdrawn above fangs as sharp as any vipers as livid runes, etched upon her skin, flared. Even as she tensed like a wildcat ready to spring another voice cut in, a deep rumbling as

Garruk laughed aloud, looking between her and the newcomer as though he recognised both. Seeing this was enough to put some of the pieces together and before anyone could stop her Chandra moved, hand diving into her pocket before the space between them was scarred red, a polished stone flashing as she shouted,

"Hey big guy, don't keep it to yourself," with a predators' reflexes he snatched the stone out the air, regarded it and just as others began to realise what had happened the green mage smiled darkly, there was a flare of mana…

… *and he ran, leaping over tangled roots and ducking branches, prey-scent in his nose as he followed the frantic cries for help and snarls of his tracking beasts. The noise was louder now and in the distance he saw the source, though couldn't see what it was until he was close enough to call off the pack. Cowing those who chafed at being denied prey with a snarl he looked up to see the odd bundle clinging to its branch, the man obviously in some terror as he yelped aloud,*

"Help, someone call the wretched beast off! Will no-one help an old man, oh, they've stopped," shouldering his axe, the green mage watched as the large canvas pack swayed side to side until, having gained sufficient momentum, it owner was able to glimpse him, "ah, good day my pleasant fellow - err, would you mind awfully helping me down?"

It was easier than picking a nut; once he was back on the floor and assured the beasts were under control the old man looked up at his towering saviour and held out a hand,

"Timothy von Pomperduke the third, though I prefer Timmy or Tim."

"Garruk," he answered, his hand swallowing half the other mans' arm, "why are you here?"

"Ah a good question; I was actually looking for an ancient temple which is supposed to be around these parts; ghastly place

apparently, some ogre tribe used to live there; when I ran afoul of your beast there. Poking about in ruins might be a young mans' game but it's a hard habit to break, though you seem to be a dab hand with that axe of yours. I'm just going to explore and, if necessary, deal with anything nasty I find, I can cut you in…"

Money and goods were of little use to him but the old were worthy of respect; the toughest prey were often those who'd survived into age. Because of that he tracked the older mans' wake, his beasts at his heels as he blocked out the incessant chattering to listen to nature, the beasts and birds guiding his paths better than this half-mad man might,

."..Keep heading west, yes, follow the sun, the ogres were very particular about it you know, they'd only do their sacrifices at dawn and dusk, suspicious lot. Still they were supposed to be crafters of a sort, all sorts of dark magic might be there still." His pack leader snarled a request and Garruk squelched it with a low bark - the old man was not prey…

… and then he fell down a hole, a long yelp echoing from its depths as the beastmage peered into it,

"You alive?"

"Oh, is that you young man? Yes, yes I'm fine, actually this is excellent, I must have slid into the catacombs of the temple. Aha, that's the rune of… oh dear, that's unpleasant - listen Garruk just keep heading west, you should see the temple in the cliffs, I'll be able to meet you there. Now, which way from here; is two skulls and a knucklebone north or east? Come on Timmy, it hasn't been too long since you studied this…" The voice faded away, Garruk left to mull the development over before shrugging; he'd got what he came to this plane for, memories of the hunt still fresh in his mind but the old man may need help. Calling his hunters to heel he strode away into the bushes, tracking his way towards the cliffs rising in the distance; at a hustle he made it just as the sun began to sink but, at a familiar scent, he sank low to the ground and approached

cautiously, eyes confirming what his nose had warned him of. Horse-flesh was near and there was something else on the wind as well; the scent of man smokier and sweeter than normal.

Before he could puzzle through what it might mean the wind shifted and he saw the animals' ear twitch; it began to whinny, tugging on its bridle as it caught the scent of predators. Stepping forwards Garruk had the pack disperse, the hunting beasts sloping into the woods as he marked this quarry as his own, his mana reaching out and soothing the panicked steed. Drawing closer as the spell left the animal in a stupor Garruk took a better scent and paused, there was no doubt the stink of that mana on the reins. Swiftly clipping on his mask he stepped within the massive edifice before him, the teeth of the temple like a gateway to hell.

The air was foul down here and made fouler still by its recent stirring, his quarry was definitely a woman, likely a sorceress and facing them never boded well. Pausing to reconnect himself with the earth and trying to find any trace of his temporary packmate he pressed on, hoping to find the old man before he ran into trouble. In this, however, he was to be disappointed; though he saw the sorceress before she saw him something alerted her and he found himself subject to a haughty glare,

"Hmm, you're cute and all but I don't deal with dirtmages. Stay there like a good boy, I have work to do." Garruk growled, his axe before him as her spell took effect and one of the entombed skeletons, as big as several of the beasts he'd bound to himself on his hunts, lumbered towards him. He easily evaded its clumsy blows but it was strong and it was relentless, almost immune to his return strikes that sent chips of bone flying. Ducking under its fist he rolled in close and hacked into its knee; desiccated ligaments parted like mooring ropes, the skeleton half-collapsing and letting him knock the head from its shoulders with the butt of his weapon. His foe destroyed he looked again for the shadow mage, seeing her just in time to see a glowing door open before her, amusement glittering in her spiteful eyes,

"Not bad for a beast but I've no time - ta." She waved and ducked halfway into the portal before being bounced back out; Garruk had just enough time to recognise disbelief on her face when another figure appeared and made his expression echo hers,

"Many thanks, that door was a pig to find from the other side. Ah it's you, the young lady from earlier, and the young man made it too," Timothy swept his battered hat from his head, not noticing the shock on both their faces as he straightened up, "well, this is a regular meeting isn't it? Shall we go outside, it's not very nice in here." Grounding the head of his axe Garruk coughed in amusement, the death-bringer lost for words as she looked from the explorer to the now-blank stone wall, jaw working soundlessly before she noticed something and recovered her voice,

"That's mine!" The old man turned, looking down at himself,

"What is?"

"That, the Veil; I was here to find it!"

"Well I'm afraid I beat you to it," Timothy shrugged, sounding apologetic, "however if you send a letter to the von Pomperduke estate I'm sure we can come to a reasonable agreement."

"Oh I agree; here are my terms," Garruk dropped into a defensive stance, holding his bloodlust in check as the shadows grew longer, black mana flooding the room as across the womans' pale skin writhing lines became visible, "either you give me that Veil or your corpse will." Opening himself to the strength of the earth Garruk prepared to enter the fray, testing his strength against one cursed by dark power but a thin arm barred his path, its owner regarding the shadow-mage coldly,

"My mistake, I thought you a lady when you're just a brat; leave this to me young man, it's not your business," with a rushing silence the shadows shot forwards like spears of nights, spears that sizzled off a shield of brightness as the man threw his hand up, "weren't

expecting that were you brat, the old duffer's got a bit of fight left in him."

"Then allow me to take it from him," the woman replied, all humanity now bled from her to power her skin-inked runes. Garruk leapt onto the nearest wall, clinging on with one hand as the floor became unstable, more of the undead rising from their rest as the necromancer called out to them. Swinging across, he was able to plant his axe between the eye-sockets of one before it could get free, though even as it fell the clatter of bones echoed loudly in the still of the tomb. Pulling his weapon free and glancing over his shoulder, the hunter saw the old man stood exactly where he had been before, each of the skeletons slumped over with… did that one have a skillet in the kneecap?

"Well now, seems we're at an impasse - I'm willing to let bygones be bygones and we'll both walk away, or maybe not. Fine, on your head, metaphorically speaking, be it," brushing off the grasping darkness, his hands alight with blazing white mana the old man stalked towards the other mage, now looking less sure of herself as her barrage of darkness failed to have much lasting effect save blowing his hat off and making his pans rattle ominously. From his elevated position Garruk narrowed his eyes; prey was most dangerous when it was desperate, something the shadowmancer proved as she lunged forwards with a stiletto of midnight coalesced in her hand. The thin blade rang off the edge of a thick frying pan, the unusual weapon then flipped around by a deft flick of the wrist, making her stumble forwards. Cocking his head, the beastmage watched as the old man reached out with his free hand, something glowing upon it; as soon as he gripped the death-witches' arm she stiffened, her tattoos fading away to nothingness,

"Weren't expecting that either were you," he said cuttingly, catching her dagger in his pan as it fell from her shaking grip, "one of the things you learn as a treasure-hunter, how to deal with curses." The witch said nothing, trying to call on help from beyond and cut off by his spell, her once-beautiful face ravaged by spite,

"What did you do?"

"I locked away the power you were given for a minute," he replied before grabbing her wrist again, the woman trying to dig her heels in as he dragged her towards the altar, "just long enough."

"Let go of me!"

"No, this is what your father should have done a long time ago," her punches and kicks rattled off his backpack and when she made a desperate lunge for the small brace of chain he'd hung at his waist her knuckles were rapped by his skillet. Before she could do much more than gasp at the pain she was yanked off her feet, Timothy spinning around and sitting down on the rough stone before flipping her blade of black mana out of his unusual weapon. As he raised the skillet high its base began to glow white, then the dagger he'd tossed up fell directly onto the now-glimmering surface, creating a strange, symmetrical pattern of light and darkness as the old man looked down at the kicking, swearing caster he'd dragged across his lap,

"Only one cure for spoiled children!"

The pan came down; Garruk saw the necromancers' eyes bulge, her jaw drop,

"OOOoooww! Stop it, sto-arrgh, no! I'll kill you, I'll fi-aaiiiee-nd your children and the-ahhh-ir children too-ooohhhh!" The writing on the walls suddenly held his fascination though he couldn't read much of it, the screeches of pain and sound of metal on flesh were terrible distractions. He didn't look back, chastisement in the pack was between pack members, but it seemed to go on for a long time, the shadow-mage refusing to show sense and yield; only when there was a sudden thump of body on stone did he break from his musing and drop off the wall. She was at the altars' feet, glaring incarnate death at the man who'd pushed her off his knees and now levelled his frying pan between her eyes,

"And if you thought that was bad be grateful you don't have my silver borders," he told her, running his free hand through his white hair as he stood up, "now I'm going to walk out that door and go back to civilisation, you stay here and improve your breeding. Take this young gentleman," recovering his hat from where the duel had dislodged it, Timothy tipped it towards the hulking planeswalker as he left, "as good an example as you could wish for - my thanks for your time Garruk, may you have safe fortune on your journeys. Here," the hunter caught the pan he was thrown with his off-hand, regarding it curiously but paying respectful attention as the adventurer smiled, "keep hold of that, it might come in useful one day. Still I must be going, I'd like to be in a comfortable inn before nightfall - now how does that verse go - de, no that's it, di-di-diddly-di, and a mighty fine one for I…"

His voice faded away as he moved towards the temple entrance, Garruk watching him go until scuffling from behind him made him look around and snort with laughter; the shadowmancer was gingerly regaining her feet, face flushed red and tears of disgrace spotting her cheeks,

"Brilliant," she hissed venomously, "absolutely brilliant. You, say nothing of what happened here - I have to get that Veil back!"

"Good luck," the beastmage grunted before smirking, "I doubt you can ride after him." She hissed, stung at the rebuke but before she could retort with either word or deed she stiffened, saved from collapse only by falling against the altar itself. Despite himself Garruk took a step forwards as her face became a rictus of pain, her skin cracking along her tattoos and weeping brackish blood. She bore the agony stoically, runes flaring wildly as their constrained mana fought for release and she sought to contain it, eventually proving the master. Her stoicism earned a sliver of respect and he dropped to a knee, calling to mind the powers of reptiles as he placed his palm upon the earth, channelling that strength to her. Maybe, for a second, she relaxed at the green mana rushing over her, then she was herself again,

"So you can do more than kill, rare in a dustmage," she said, voice still tight with suffering, "you want my thanks you'll be waiting until you're as dusty as those bags of bones."

"You are strong," he admitted, boosting himself to full height and looking down at her, "but do not follow that one." She laughed, a bitter noise that ended in a gasp as she made to sit on the altar, Garruk holding in a chuckle as he realised his spell had dulled the pain of her chastisement,

"Like I have a choice, someone I know tasked me to find it and he doesn't take failure well. Either I kill the old man and get the veil or I kill the demon." Garruk pondered this for a moment before facing the shadowmage again,

"What is a demon?"

Liliana's expression of shock and disdain was the last thing they saw and it was infinitely preferable to the visage of dread and murder awaiting them when the memory faded. The necromancer was trembling, fury erupting from every pore as no-one else dared look at each other for fear of being the first to break. Chandra especially was keeping her head down, hoping against hope Liliana had forgotten exactly how the memory had become public knowledge and not helped by a small voice in her ear,

" *If that's in print all is forgiven* "; it was a tough struggle but somehow she kept her laughter contained and mind still enough to answer,

" *Me too, I need to get a copy*," before another voice made her look over,

"Ah, glad to see you again young man, and in good company at last. What was that you just used, may I see it, and did that pan come in handy at all?"

"Traded it for a good spear," Garruk admitted, handing over the now-warm red stone and, though it didn't look like it, hoping he didn't take offence at the loss of his kitchenware,

"Told you it would come in handy didn't I, and you, brat," smoke was rising from Liliana's hands; that it would react badly, and likely fatally, with the already-laid enchantments they'd weaved the only reason she hadn't drowned the room in the mana of the swamps, "look somewhere else with that glare lest I give you more of the same, I've plenty of copper bottoms left to test yours."

Before Liliana could see who sniggered the man who'd humiliated her was before them all, in the centre of the horseshoe of tables and glancing around appraisingly,

"Well you've been thorough I'll grant you that," he admitted, stuffing his hat into his pocket, "I told them we were moving too fast but would they listen? These young whippersnappers have no respect for their elders, maybe I should do to them what I did to you - actually I'll note that down, it's a good idea." Liliana's nails dragged grooves through the table she was leant on, her skin white as chalk and veins of mana pulsing with dark power as someone else spoke,

"You wrote these?" Nissa had her spear in hand, face expressionless save for the murder in her eyes as she held up the book Vraska had shown her. The old human squinted at it and she felt naught but disdain - their vision was so terrible,

"Not that one no, *Beast and Beauty* was mine; so, tell me what you've found out in your investigations, I'm sure my associates will want to know how thorough you've been."

"Associates?" Tamiyo's voice was sharper than before, "How many of you are there?"

"Enough to write a book series popular across half the Multiverse, though I have to say yours wasn't the best seller," he answered the moonfolk, apparently unconcerned as she narrowed her eyes, "I did

tell him Llorwyn was a bad place to start but he wouldn't listen, he likes that plane too much - sales picked up when we moved away from there though."

"Enough!" Koth was on his feet, the Vulshok's gauntlets running red with power as the rocks under his feet trembled at his rage, "Who are you, who are your friends and what reason do you have for this rusting of our names? Speak quickly lest I beat the answers from you!"

"Temper, temper," the man warned him, waving a finger, "I am, as I thought you'd seen from this marvellous stone, Timothy von Pomperduke but I am not, as you might think, a planeswalker, none of us are; my associates and I discovered a different method of moving through the planes. I can see your questions, your demands to know how dare I do this or that; all I have to say is I can only answer some of you, the rest will have to wait for their own authors."

"Where are they?" Gideon, to his credit, wasn't as angry as many of the others; it was up to him to set a good example even if his associate was reluctant to heed it, "can you contact them somehow?"

"Or give us their names; we'll kick the doors in ourselves," Chandra assured him, plugging her gauntlet in and preparing to run fire through the leylines she'd help Jace set up. The elderly gentleman glanced at her appraisingly before shrugging,

"Seeing the legs on you I don't doubt it"; *he dies, and so do you later* ; Jace's snicker was the only reason she didn't immediately flash-fry the impudent man, "but there's no need to get het up, you'll be seeing them all about, five."

"Five?" Venser glanced about, his soratami companions looking just as mystified, "Five what?"

"Five, four, three…"

They were all moving, mana of every hue rushing through spells and being called to augment strength when Ravnica suddenly jumped under them, throwing them all off-balance, the opportunity the only one unperturbed by this needed. His hands were a blur, small items whickering through the air and those they struck vanished on the spot, no chance to defend themselves against the onslaught. Only two were left untouched, one of them sending the table before him smashing against the far wall as he surged to his feet,

"Where are they?" Garruk cared little for people at the best of times but none of the assembled had thought him a monster and the mergirl had treated his companion well,

"They're with their authors now," there was no joviality in his tone, even the twin frying pans he was spinning in his hands not making him look comical as he regarded the two planeswalkers left with a chilling smile, "you look surprised; maybe I shouldn't be. After all how could an absent-minded fool pose a threat to you, the planeswalkers, some of the greatest minds, mages, geomancers, necromancers and suchlike to exist within the Multiverse? Arrogance was ever your downfall even before the Mending, and you've less excuse than most."

"I'll need no excuses fool," Liliana was already drawing on her power, now free of the others she could really go to work and repay her embarrassment a thousand times over; *first on him, then on the wretch who dared show that memory, then on the wench who let him do so* ; "even demons will weep for your fate!"

"So you say," Timothy grinned, clashing his pans together, "come then brat, you as well my young gentleman; show an old duffer what you've got!"

He leapt out the doors, Garruk smashing through them a second later with his weasel leading the way and axe held ready as Liliana floated behind, borne aloft by twisted ebon magic and content to let the beastmage weaken her foe before she dealt the killing blow. They ran throughout the Guildhall, sending spells ricocheting off

walls and shattering furniture until finally Timothy, crossed skillets holding back the edge of Garruk's axe, was hurled through the main doors by the strength of the green mages' arm. Bounding after his foe with Liliana's phantoms screaming overhead neither planeswalker realised immediately what had changed until they were in the thick of battle and by then it was too late as, left behind in the wreckage of the council room, a small bundle of fluff hopped around the overturned table, found a piece of paper and gave it a cautious nibble.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 - Facing the Demons.

He could hear the sea and turned to face it, waiting for his vision to recover as he unravelled his whip. Whatever technique the other mage had used he both hadn't seen before and didn't like; he'd never trusted any magic to do with speed or teleportation,

"Gideon," the quaver of fear in a familiar voice made him glad the whiteness was starting to shimmer away, "are, you there?"

"It's all right Kiora," he fed mana into his sural, the lash writhing around him softly as he tried to home in on her voice, "keep talking, I'll find you."

"I can't see."

"Don't panic, it'll fade," the sural touched something and he hastily felt down it, a blurry picture forming just as his hand met a much smaller one clinging to his whip. Relief coursing through him he held tight, feeling her fins tremble as her strangled whisper of,

"I'm scared," broke his heart - he'd sworn she'd not be put in danger, *sworn* it, and now this,

"I know, I am too," he admitted, feeling her head-fins brush his arm as her face swam into a view, a little smeared but clearing, "can you see yet?"

"A bit; where are we? I can hear the ocean."

"So can I; I'm going to let go now," he did, gradually, "I don't know what's going on, my seal alone should have prevented abjuration from that room. He must have had an artefact of some kind, something that didn't need mana to move us against our will." The hieromancer was finally able to clear his vision completely and,

despite himself, chuckled as he noticed something he hadn't seen up to that point,

"What?" Kiora heard his mirth and started as she glanced up at him, "You've been hit!"

"So have you," he replied, the merfolk crossing her eyes as he reached down and gently tugged the small, suction-cupped dart from the centre of her forehead, mirroring the one on his chest, "some kind of touch-trigger, working the instant it touched a body, yes that might do it. He split us up into our, ah couples," it was a kind of twisted game, one that made his teeth grind; he expected, even relished tests of skill and strength but this kind of convoluted plot, especially involving innocents, gave him a bad feeling, "so why bring us here? Kiora is there any… Kiora?"

She wasn't listening, not an unusual occurrence but this time for a valid reason; her eyes were fixed on the distance and, after he followed them, so were his. A figure stood between them and the gently-rolling sea, a familiar one that sent a jolt of both recognition and betrayal through Gideon's chest despite the softness in her eyes. He tried to say something but fumbled, introductions left to the mergirl now bristling beside him,

"My nemesis," she declared venomously, making the familiar stranger smile as she exhaled a plume of smoke before knocking out her pipe,

"So, curiosity didn't kill the sprat then?" She drawled, a spiked gaff resting loosely over one shoulder as she faced the pair of them, "Do you even know what nemesis means?"

"Uhh, yeah; you're my enemy!"

"Why though Jhon'ee?" Gideon cut in, preparing to do what was needed even if it meant cutting down one who'd once done him right, "You wrote our book?"

"I supplied the story," the Kor nodded, swinging her gaff to aim at him and looking as resigned as he felt, "it's up to you to decide how it ends." The hieromancer shook his head,

"We don't have to fight and you don't want to, I can see that - is someone forcing you? Can we help whatever trouble you're in?" She smiled softly, looking from the man to the mergirl,

"You always want to help Jura, that's why *Whip and Wave* turned out as it did - you put others above yourself when not many will. You're right of course, I don't really want to fight you, there's no real need so," her smile deepened, her legs bunching under her trews, "consider me a spar for what's coming."

"Coming? You mean, after you?"

"Yes," Jhon'ee answered her once-captives' half-furious, half-concerned question with a nod, "you know how many books were written, how many different authors there must be. None of them, save maybe one, are as unwilling to fight as I am - you made a good impression, few of the others did." Kiora's hand flew to her mouth,

"The others, like Fury and, and the snake-hair lady, they're in danger?"

"They could very well be."

"Then I'll make this quick," the air blurred, cracks of a now-blazing whip making all present jump as Gideon stepped forwards, putting his feelings aside for the good of the many, "stay behind me."

Just this once the merfolk did as she was told; a gaff spun, lashes snapped and the battle was joined.

"Tamiyo-san, duck."

Fortunately teleportation was not something any of the three were unfamiliar with due to Venser and Kaguya's by-now reflexive use of her unusual gift following the jaunt gave her fellow soratami plenty of warning. The Moon Sage bowed lowly from the waist, the movement as elegant and graceful as everything else she did, unruffled as a flash of metal passed through where her head had been seconds before,

"Sump-sucking leeches on an akki corpse I curse rescuing you!"

"Really Splay-Paw, you?" Venser groaned, taking in the continual pain in his and Tamiyo's, and later Kaguya's, collective sides crouched a little way away, "Couldn't carry out your contract so you peddled stories to pay your way?" Tamiyo shot her fellow chronicler of the Multiverse a sharp look,

"You believe him to be the one who insulted us in print?"

"It has to be, who but Kamigawas' worst assassin knows all three of us?"

"I doubted he could read."

"Hey, I stood here," the nezumi demanded, ears pricked up in irritation at the slander, "and I still need your head moonfolk - even with my cut I'm still penniless."

"Yes, we were told it sold poorly," Kaguya chipped in, regarding the rodent with a expression somewhere between disdain and fondness; for all the trouble he caused she did owe him for saving her life,

"Don't I know it," he complained, his needle teeth exposed in a rough approximation of a smile, "I only need one of you, I'm not paid for extra heads…"

"Can we just skip this bit? You know we're going to say you can't kill Tamiyo-san," Venser cut in abruptly, recalling the first time their paths had crossed…

Where the hell was that journal; he'd only put it down for an instant and someone had walked off with it. You couldn't trust anyone these days the sojourner thought to himself, surreptitiously linking himself to the minor enchantment he'd placed over his most prized possession for just this purpose. The trail was faint but easy enough to follow and the notes he'd taken had been written in such a way to ensure few could actually read them, especially the things he was now investigating such as the end of the Phyrexian invasion of Mirrodin, something he still scarcely believed despite his two friends swearing its truth on all that was dear to them. A thin shimmer of mana connected him to the errant journal and he followed it, passing through the Ragathan market square and seeing the trail end by the side of someone sat outside a minor library. That was conscientious, they must have thought it missing and he was about to reclaim his property before he noticed something suspicious.

It wasn't just his diary that was glowing in his mage-sight, the woman was as well.

Attuned to the mana of the sun and sky he was easily able to tell the presence of a glamouring; the plain woman wasn't who she presented herself as and, with his journal, she had access to something few could be trusted with. Whoever the stranger was she seemed little threat, buried in a scroll and making notes of her own, hardly even looking up as he sat down opposite her and cleared his throat,

"Ah, forgive me madam, but I believe you have something of mine there." She looked up at him and, forewarned, he saw the glint of something more than normal in the grey eyes that glanced at him,

"And what is that?"

"My journal, I'm afraid I misplaced it earlier," he indicated the book by her side, "I've been looking for it all morning - where did you find it?"

"On the street over there, you must have dropped it. I thought it one of the library novels and went to return it, I hope you do not mind but

I took a brief look and realised it was, not in a local language."

"I'm not from around here," Venser had felt her subtle glamour just as she must have felt his - she was evidently a caster of some kind, "I'm grateful for finding it; if it's not improper, may I repay you with a short translation to some of the more obscure passages?" She scrutinised him for a minute and he didn't resist the minor rustles of mana-infused wind she disguised with her breath before nodding silently, gathering up what he recognised as a calligraphy set of unusual quality before standing. He followed, the two of them disappeared around a corner and down a small alley unseen. They went a short distance before she stopped and bowed slightly, letting the enchantment on her voice drop,

"Forgive me," her first words convinced him he'd been right, though her words were flawless her accent wasn't just foreign, it wasn't even human, "I did not steal."

"I know, I wouldn't even accuse you of theft - it's my fault for leaving this thing lying about and I'm not angry you looked," Venser replied, deflecting her apology, "I keep meaning to make copies of some…"

Whether it was the noise of claws on slate, a shadow at the corner of his eye or just plain intuition he would never know but whatever it was that made him lunge forwards and pull her into him he was forever grateful. Even as shock made her eyes widen there was a rush just behind her, a black shape dropping from the roof overhead as Venser pushed the girl behind him, summoning his mana as he recognised a blade in the creatures' hand,

"Damn it stupid-man," the thing, some grotesque amalgamation of man and rat, spat as it stood to its full height, sheathing its notched knife, "you know how hard it is to find Moon Sage, and hide in this man-warran this long?"

"Who are you?" The sojourner demanded, ready to banish this thing back to whatever hell had spawned it in an instant but, to his relief, it scurried back a safe distance and glared at him,

"Very annoyed stupid-man; her head is worth much coin and you saved it." A gust of cold wind make the hairs on Vensers' neck stand up and he risked a glance over his shoulder only to start; free of her disguise his fellow planeswalker, for nothing on Regatha looked like she did, regarded the rat-man as though it were something beneath her,

"And who paid for my head nezumi?"

"Ha, like I tell you moonfolk; I get you next time"; Venser noticed his tail twitch too late, dropping a small ball that burst with an explosion of evil-smelling smoke. By the time it cleared the creature was gone and Venser was left wondering what to say to someone who could stare down an attempt on her life with little more than a cool glare,

"Ah, someone doesn't like you I take it?" It was a brave stab and, to his credit, the other being nodded slowly after sizing him up,

"So it would seem; my thanks for your help."

"Please, it was nothing, I barely knew what was going on," Venser waved off her praise modestly, "my name is Venser, may I have your name and, well, if you know what that thing was."

"Tamiyo, chronicler of the Moon," came the lilting reply, "and he was a nezumi, a repulsive scraping from a Kamigawan swamp. An assassin it seems, though a poor one - I doubt we will see him again, the cowards tend to leave what they cannot stab in the back alone."

In this, however, Tamiyo had been proven wrong; the nezumi was a cunning and relentless foe, though he appeared curiously unlucky or, as Venser suggested after a loose roofing tile had resulted in the lurking ratman falling noisily to the floor at their feet, he was delaying taking the Moon Sages' head for some reason. If he wasn't a planeswalker himself he knew someone who was, even moving around the Multiverse didn't shake him from their shadows. Along with a mutual interest in history and record-keeping the assassin's attempts became something else that filled their time, as did the

aftermath of the one time they met him supposedly off-duty, Tamiyo glancing over Vensers' shoulder and placing her calligraphy brush down,

"Do not look now but…"

"I wonder, if I teleported him to one of the moons do you think he'd leave us be?"

"I doubt it, he is remarkably slow to learn his lessons even for a nezumi," the sojourner snorted softly, having come to enjoy the soratami's dry humour over the past few months, "he seems to want something other than my head however." Looking over his shoulder the artificer narrowed his eyes; it could be a trick but the assassin did look edgier than normal and was beckoning them frantically - in fact now he thought about it this was likely the first time he'd even seen the creature when he wasn't trying to kill them,

" I'll go; he won't hurt me," Tamiyo nodded, it was true enough; more than once her would-be killer had pulled a blow or defused a trap that Venser rather than her would have walked into. The nezumi said and did nothing as, carefully, he opened the window a crack and spoke,

"All right flea-pit what is it?"

"Voice down stupid-man," it hissed back, ears flat as it crouched on the windowsill, "get Moon Sage; no contract," he said sharply at Venser's look, pointing to his belt, "no knives, no blades."

"What do you need her for?"

"Too many questions stupid-man, get her quick-quick then go to main door, I wait there." He dropped into the night without a sound, Venser left mystified as he shut the window and told Tamiyo the rat shinobis' cryptic message.

They did decide to heed it and it was for the best they did; true to his word the nezumi was unarmed and he quickly led them away from the inn they were staying in, explaining over his shoulder as he did. Apparently he'd followed a rumour that the Moon Sage had separated from the stupid-man and seized his chance for the kill only to realise, too late,

."..She not you," he finished, pointing at Tamiyo as the soratami took in the figure sat huddled on the side of the street, poorly disguised in rags, "I got her out but she bad-hurt. She soratami so I bring her to you - she not like Kamigawa." Tamiyo said nothing, stepping past the diminutive native to her world as his tail reached up, gripping Vensers' wrist as he went to follow her,

"Girl talk," the nezumi explained shortly as the two moonfolk whispered, leaving the sojourner dumbfounded,

"They, ah, they have that on Kamigawa?"

"Much, very much; I have ten-eight sisters, grew up more out of warren than in it from girl talk. Mint-grass, you want?" He offered something up in his paw, shrugging when Venser shook his head and throwing it into his mouth, chewing with every indication of enjoyment as the planeswalker regarded him,

"You're a very, odd assassin aren't you?"

"And you a very stupid man; one day I need to complete my contract, not be able to care about extra heads," the nezumi said warningly,

"Well let's hope that's in the future; can I at least get your name, and why are you trying to kill Tamiyo?" In the dim light of the moons the rat-mans' black eyes gleamed as he regarded the much taller human before shrugging,

"Splay-Paw," it took Venser a second to realise that must have been his name, "and it for coin. She has good price and I have many

mouths to feed."

"I see; couldn't you…?"

"No, is honour as well; if I fail no-one hires me, my runts starve."

"Unfortunate; well for what it's worth I hope you don't succeed and your, ah, runts live long." The nezumi's fangs were bared, the closest he could get to a smile,

"You a good stupid-man; they come, I go."

Spitting out a cud of mashed grass the assassin scrambled up the nearest wall like a spider, his tail disappearing just as Tamiyo appeared again, another soratami half-leaning on her shoulder. That immediately told Venser this was a serious matter - if nothing else he'd quickly learned the moonfolk were a proud people, almost too proud in some ways,

"She is hurt Venser," there was more than a trice of warning in the Moon Sages' melodious voice, "we must get her to shelter, much has happened. Where is the nezumi?"

"Gone," the sojourner said shortly, trying to take in the newcomer but bringing himself up short as she flinched upon noticing him, "is she, what happened to her eyes?"

"Later, we must go back."

"Right, follow me…"

Kaguya, as Tamiyo had later introduced them, soon joined them and slowly her past had been revealed, though much of it she couldn't recall after her experience with a dangerous fruit. Eventually she managed to relax around Venser and when the two of them rescued the Moon Sage together from the blades of her usual assailant, Splay-Paw quickly abandoning his temporary truce, her gifted vision became an invaluable tool. So the three of them took to the

Multiverse together, recording and taking cuttings from the varied planes and fending off their persistent annoyance, waiting for him to either finally leave them alone or give them a chance to be rid of him for good…

… and it seemed today would be that day; the nezumi looked more serious than normal and held a pair of ill-used blades, rather than just his usual one,

"Regardless nezumi-san, the answer is still no," Kaguya said softly, her pupilless eyes set upon him as he shook his head despairingly,

"Why; she just one - I have three-ten and two squealing runts to feed and more litters on the way!"

"Your poor planning is not my error rat," Splay-Paw hissed at the insult before smirking,

"Rather mine than yours *kurisumasukeki* ; even in book you couldn't get rut-joy," Venser guessed the unfamiliar word was an insult as both soratami gasped, "your *shitagi* hangs on with cobwebs, I blame stupid-man." Tamiyo reddened, Kaguya covering her mouth with a hand while Venser, amazed as he'd never seen the either soratami this flustered before, spoke,

"Regardless Splay-Paw you cannot…"

He never saw the rat move, he only felt a sudden coldness on his cheek and there was blood on his fingers as he touched there. Even as he realised what had happened the nezumi lowered his now-empty hand, looking regretful but determined,

"Her head is overdue," he said evenly, "now I take more if I must. No more games."

For her blindness was not the terror it was for most; gifted other senses since her selection to bear a gorgons' bite Vraska merely

waited for her sight to return, sensing both an ally and a possible opponent as her symbiotes prepared for battle,

"Elf, is your name Revane?"

"Snake-woman," came the reply, one blot in her prey-sight moving, "did you know of this?"

"No and I am Vraska, not snake-woman." The gorgon had the impression the elf would have said something else, likely derogatory, had an unfamiliar voice not beaten her to it,

"Nope, no snakes in this forest; just me you've got to worry about Princess."

"I believed you dead," the distaste in the Zendikarians' voice was palpable as she levelled her spear in the voices' direction, "a belief I will soon make true." The earth heaved, Vraska darting to the side as the ground lurched upright, imbued with elemental power and lumbering towards their hidden foe,

"A warning would be appreciated Revane."

"Stay out of my way snake-woman, that is your warning," the elf spat back before glancing ahead in shock; the living land was sinking back, the life she'd imbued spilling away through a rent in what had been its head, its conqueror riding its body to the ground as the elemental was subsumed into the earth,

"Well this is going to be fun I can tell," the stranger said, only she wasn't a stranger; Vraska stiffened in shock remembering both the voice and the face, one of the first faces she'd ever seen eye to eye,

"You, when the Azorius came to arrest us you were there."

"I was and so were you; hey," a handful of razor-edged leaves flew between them, the woman ducking swiftly out of the way, "and you wonder why I had to completely re-design you for *Eyes and Ears* ?"

"For that insult you will die," the elf gave a brief salute with her spear before advancing while her opponent, definitely human and clad in a manner similar to a Ravnican gateless, mirrored the gesture with a shortsword she pulled from under her cloak,

"And for your rudeness you're in for a rude awakening!"

Unbeknownst to them the other two denizens of Ravnica had been dropped relatively close to their gorgon friend, though they were just before the forest rather than within it. Even as he fought the nausea from the transport Jace had latched onto whatever mana he could find, though by his estimate he was a good distance from any major source of water. He'd just have to be careful with his mana and a familiar warmth at his back gave him confidence,

"Jace, you're here too right?"

"I am; do you see any of the others?"

"Can't see bugger all," the pyromaster replied and he heard the familiar snap of her goggles falling over her eyes, "decrepit bastard, how did he beat everyones' wards?"

"I do not know," upon arrival Jace had reflexively scanned the area for hostile magic but unfortunately the mana lattice that had brought them here had dispersed by that point, the brightness that had temporarily blinded him making him miss the smoke as it burnt out, "must have been some kind of teleportal, no doubt the Izzet could tell us more if they were here."

"Rather you than me dealing with them," Chandra snorted, her sight returning and stained sepia through her eyewear, "hey Jace, I think I know why you and Liliana failed; she needed a firm hand…"

The reminder made him convulse, the sight he'd seen through the Wildspeakers' eyes ones he'd be revisiting for years to come;

despite the delicious revenge however, he had to keep his mind on the issue at hand; *no, don't think about hands, or kitchenware…* ;

"Chandra we've been dropped in the middle of gods-know-where with no supplies and no idea where anyone else is and if that's the sum of our problems we'll be lucky, the last thing either of us need now is a fit of the giggles."

"Speak for yourself," she managed in reply, trying to hold back the tide just as he was, "can you see anything yet?"

"It's coming back, I think… oh balls"; *that's not good* ; anything that could drive the mind-mage to profanity was, in Chandra's experience, something to avoid, "strike me blind again - I should have known one of the guilds was involved in this but I wouldn't have guessed yours."

"Who? Oh finally, a witch I can kill! How's your hand blood-bitch?" Grin stretched beyond sanity the former Maze Runner of the Rakdos cult lifted her maimed appendage, looking at it as though it were a curiosity to amuse her,

"Tell me when it's buried in your guts," her voice was a high, shrill shriek, hearing long since ruined by the music favoured by her guild and all else about her ravaged by excess. All save the hand her glassy gaze was staring at, the flesh fused to the metal it would grasp for eternity by something other than one of her clans' mad initiation rites…

Not for the first time, Jace decided his mind had a death-wish.

Really, who was ever so interested in a few strange marks in the Tenth District they'd look deeply into the matter, and even more so when the plot thickened so much it led to a kidnapping and a nightclub owed by the most depraved maniacs in a plane-wide city where violence was scarcely far away? A sensible man would have walked away - he, on the other hand, was biting back a snarl of pain as a thin dagger was dug slowly into his shoulder and praying none

of his enchantments wore out, otherwise things were going to get very messy indeed,

"Not a talker then? Ah but I wonder," the Rakdos witch crooned as she slid her blade out of his flesh, leaning in so close he could smell the tang of intoxicants on her breath, "are you a screamer?"

"You know it's been so long I've forgotten," he managed, exhausted by the mental effort of simultaneously ensuring this crazy killer kept her attention on him rather than the elf her cultists had kidnapped, masking the feeble trickle of healing magic Emmara was feeding into him and stopping anyone else in this hell-hole noticing what was going on. His only hope was that his absence was missed by his fellow investigator but, as Exava grinned madly and showed the points her teeth had been filed into, that hope was failing. Luckily Emmera's work numbed the pain, so much so that he barely felt the next incision even if he made a show of screwing up his face; it was the Rakdos after all, best to give a bit of a show to prevent her moving into the second act.

Over the explosive noise of the disco, the unbearable heat and Exava's attentions there was no rational way he should have heard the small, almost silent gasp but hear it he did and the sight when he looked up was one of the most welcome things he'd ever seen. With the smoking bodies of the bouncers trying to feebly crawl away from her feet Chandra Nalaar stood in the clubs' entryway, beautiful in her fury, terrible in her wrath as her embered gaze swept over him. Some of the cultists cheered as they saw her, thinking her part of the entertainment until a blazing ball of fire blew the main speakers up, the sudden silence so abrupt it was deafening as was the demand that followed it,

"Everyone out," steam vented from the pyromancers' back as her gauntlets were plugged in, her icy tone in stark contrast to her blazing eyes, "you've just been shut down."

The smart ones, as much as the term could apply to the Rakdos, quickly ran when those who rushed her were turned into torches, the

club devolving into a riot as Chandra stepped forwards, tongues of fire licking out to set the furnishings alight and see this pit burnt to the ground. Exava bellowed in rage, leaving her captives to push through the crowd and Jace seized his chance, incapacitating all close enough to interfere with a pulse of mental energy as Emmara slipped her bonds,

"Come on," she shouted, kicking out as one of his victims began stirring and sending the cultist into full unconsciousness, "I saw them slipping out this way - it must lead outside!"

"Not without Chandra," Jace's eyes were glowing, more than just vision scrying over the crowd as his mana pulsed, confusing all about him and letting him see what would happen an instant before it did. His cry of alarm was lost in the din, Chandra having lost her opponent in the crush until Exava, driven to beyond fury by the destruction of her club, flung herself from a low table towards the source of her ruination. The pyromancer was alerted by her scream but couldn't avoid her completely, the two women going down as Jace rushed towards them, throwing bodies left and right with his mana and his mind as worry flooded his gut. The club was emptying, the stampede lessening as people made for the exits and his heart stopped at the sight on the club floor; Exava straddled the firebrand, her poniard buried in red-headed woman's shoulder and drawing her head back to laugh.

Ravnica greyed out, the crackle of flame faded and all Jace could see was the knife, the hand that wielded it and what it had done. Exava's mind was a ruin, a diseased, polluted thing he'd only brushed before but no longer, now he would tear it apart no matter what it cost him - it was the work of a second to prepare himself before the scream reached him, a terrible, rending noise. Exava wasn't laughing, her hand was smothered by Chandra's gauntlet and there was more than smoke in the air, the stink of burning flesh filled the club as the pyromaster bucked her enemy off, swearing as the dagger was dragged from her shoulder but still alive and now in

control of the fight as she willed her fire to consume the womans' hand,

"You like knives bitch," she growled, the words sawing through the ringmasters' agonised screeches, "hold onto this!" Her boot came up and then down, a vicious curb-stomp that splattered the Rakdos' nose and she straightened, gripping her wound as she dropped the twisted hunk of meat and melted metal that had once been a fist, and Jace had never felt such relief,

"Chandra!" She looked up at his shout, eyes still consumed by flame as he reached her and on a dance floor covered in smoke and ruin they embraced; it was an instant of peace, an oasis of silence in the maelstrom but it couldn't last, Jace disentangling himself as he felt the firebrand twitch,

"Emmara," he called, holding her at arms-length and terrified by the blood trickling down her arm, "how much healing have you got left?"

"It's nothing; I'm the one smart enough to wear armour," the point of the poniard had pierced her chain but it hadn't gone in deeply. Glancing from the elf to her housemate she raised an eyebrow,

"Pretty girl in a place like this - something you want to tell me Jace?" Even Emmara smirked as the mind-mage stuttered,

"It's not like that…"

"Explain later," Chandra cut him off, "the heavy mobs' on their way - I, ah, might have caused some disturbance on the…"

Whatever she'd caused was nothing, absolutely nothing to the disturbance that suddenly burst over them, both planeswalkers going rigid as they realised what must have happened but it couldn't be, it surely couldn't. Only the crash as a ceiling beam fell in and Emmara shouted they needed to go now brought them back to reality, sharing a glance,

"Get her out of here and find out about this damned maze, I'll sort this"; Jace nodded, reaching for the Selesnya elf before pausing, just for a heartbeat,

"Chandra," preparing to enter the Eternities she glanced at him, "that was the most beautiful I've ever seen." It could have been a trick of the light but he would have sworn she blushed and he smiled, Emmara glancing between the two and speaking as she followed her friend towards the back exit,

"What about her?"

"She'll be fine; any fire trying to burn her will scald itself. She'll erase any trace we were there."

"Good, we'd best lay low for a while - you can tell me about Chandra, was it, while we're licking our wounds."

Judging from the impish smile on the elfs' face he guessed that was going to be a long and torturous conversation, though the fact the firebrand had rescued them both should stand her in better stead than the last woman he'd brought to her doorstep. Even as the two made their escape the aforementioned pyromancer was reaching the end of a trail and arrived in an unfamiliar place with a squelch - it always had to be mud. Pushing herself to her feet she glanced around, saw a shape cloaked in the darkens of the murky trees nearby and raised her hands, though she was ready to defend herself if need be,

"It's all right," she said as soothingly as she could manage, "you just arrived here didn't you?" The shadow she was watching flickered slightly and, emboldened, she carried on,

"I know you're scared, you're wondering what just happened and where you are now - you're all right, you're not mad. I'm the same as you, I can explain - will you come out?" The nascent planeswalker did, breaching her concealment and despite herself Chandra looked

away, heart hammering at the sight of the creature - she'd never seen one before but she knew the legends,

"I will not harm you if you return the courtesy," the voice, slightly rasping but perfectly understandable made her glance up, take in the dull olive scales and, more than that, the threadbare clothing that covered some of them,

"You're, Golgari?"

"A loose affiliation but this is not Ravnica. What happened to me?"

"What's the last thing you remember, uh…?"

"My name is Vraska; I was begging in the streets of the Tenth District when the wall behind me exploded, I believe it was a giant or ogre of the Rakdos. I felt pain, then falling, I wanted to return to the Swarm and safety. Though you may not believe me my gaze won't harm you unless I will it."

"Hence why you ended up here, this is like your safe place," Chandra mumbled to herself before, steeling her courage and rationalising that if the other planeswalker was lying she wouldn't be in any fit state to complain about it she looked up, seeing the vertical pupils of the snake-like face regarding her, the emotions within hidden and likely very different to her own, "sorry but…"

"No need to apologise; explain where we are now, and what is your name?"

"Okay Vraska, my name's Chandra Nalaar and I'm, well, actually we are planeswalkers. I'll have to explain a few things so you'd best get comfortable…"

Both had thought the mad witch dead until the start of the deadly race some time later and time hadn't improved Exava's looks much. Dragged from the rubble scarcely alive and consumed by the fires of Chandras' rage and her planeswalk what was not a pretty sight had

been left a horror Jace was forced to endure on a weekly basis at the Guildmeet, though while there she was forced to cover the deadly fusion of metal and scorched flesh left by her handshake with the pyromaster. Exava said little usually, too strung out on whatever intoxicants the Rakdos were indulging that week but here she seemed alert and crazier than ever, pupils expanded and gums bloody as she smiled, grinding her teeth through her flame-marked face,

"A pretty, pretty thing, all it can do is murder and maim and that's what it will do, it will," she cackled, apparently unconcerned as the duo who'd reduced to her pitiful state focussed on her again, summoning fire and mist, "the Guildpact will be rewritten in blood, his, hers and mine too; oh what fun we'll have bleeding together!"

Even as he stumbled upon landing he heard Elspeth mutter,

"Shadow-conceal," and the rasp of her sword being drawn and stilled, one hand in the soft sand at his knees as he recovered his balance. Having fought with the woman across half of Mirrodin he knew her training well and respected it even more - the knight could kill without her vision. Any sound would alert her, something he didn't want to risk as he heard waves in the distance and, maybe, something else nearby as well, a very faint scraping that was familiar but he couldn't quite place. Channelling mana through the sand was difficult; though not water-logged it was soft and unresponsive but he eventually set up a decent perimeter, alert if anything stepped within twenty paces. Eventually his sight cleared and the Vulshok stood, glancing around and realising, as expected, he was at the back of a beach somewhere, a river over to his left as he spoke,

"Me Elspeth," she twitched but recognised him, opening her eyes quickly and then nodded,

"Light-reveal"; *so she can see too, as can I now* ; scanning his surroundings he saw the figure sitting with its back to them just as he finally placed the noise, one he heard every day in his forge, one

he'd used for many nights to quiet little Tiszta when she'd been a mote; *so it truly was real, and this is the time.*

"Stand and face us," the voice of his comrade was firm and steady, as it had ever been, "I will not strike a foe in the back." The sitting figure said nothing for a minute, running the whetstone over the blade of its scythe, a myriad of other blades sheathed across its back as it honed what both planeswalkers guessed was an already fine edge,

"You are a fool," they looked at each other and understanding passed between them; *the same voice - he was real* ; "honour, valour - are they worth more than the gift you were given?"

"Not to me," Koth rasped, punching his fists together with a bang, "Tiszta is my fleck now."

The name of the Vulshoks' adopted daughter finally brought a reaction; the sharpening stopped and he stood, unimpeded by the grey plate mail that should have sunk him to his knees in the loose sand, his collection of blades clinking. He was as they remembered through foggy memories, the menacing silhouette, the face shielded by an ornate head-guard and veiled but for the grey eyes that swept over them like a storm, just as a storm had liberated their world from the tyranny of a threat more dreadful than any had imagined…

It began with Vensers' screaming, a scream soon echoed from every quarter.

The council was abandoned, the forces mustered under their ragged banner rushing to aid the wounded who now writhed under the touch of the dread disease of their enemies. Holding the sojourner as he clutched his chest Elspeth reached for her mana, tearing off his tunic and revolted at the spots of black bubbling up beneath his flesh. Weaving the healing mana around the affliction the knight of Bant bit her lip, will as much as weaving forcing the spell to work - she couldn't lose anyone else to these monsters, especially not another planeswalker even if his ideas for questing for his former mentor

were ridiculous given the resistances' perilous state. Coils of white mana constricted the loathsome oil, a memento from Vensers' previous battles with the Phyrexian menace before suddenly they burst, Elspeth stepping back to avoid contamination as the evil slime oozed from the rent in his skin, dripping and dribbling over the floor in a black stream.

"Venser," she demanded, calling on her strength once more but to her surprise there was no blood, the exit wound she'd been expecting missing as with a clatter of metal Koth ran in,

"What happened, I," he cut off, mana flaring at the sight of the oil that was soon lost in fire, sizzling to nothingness, "where did that come from?"

"Me," a weak voice answered, Venser struggling to sit upright, "it just, I don't know what happened, it just hurt."

"And not just for you," Elspeth was already stood, cape on and mana flaring as she headed towards the other sounds of suffering, "Koth with me, whatever the machines are doing we must stop it here."

But it could not be stopped, from all the infected the glistening oil writhed and boiled, the harbinger of the nightmare seeping out of its hosts. Though the Vulshok shaman, Koth foremost amongst them, burnt much of it to ruin some escaped, flowing back out of their hidden camp in rivulets of night. Many, too ravaged by the sickness, died but come the morning it seemed those who survived had truly survived with no signs of the dreaded change continuing, though they were left weak by the parasites' loss. Venser was foremost amongst them, the sojourner regarding his two friends grimly,

"I have no idea what happened but it can't be good - even if the oil is gone it must have a purpose somehow. The Phyrexians would never abandon their work like this."

"We never knew they could," Koth cut in, thinking the nights' events over, "some have survived the infection but none like you, and why

didn't you say you were suffering?" Caught out and under Elspeth's gimlet eye the older 'walker gave a guilty smile,

"Didn't want to worry you - anyway forget that, we have to know what those monsters are up to, we have to follow the corruption and hope it leads us to the source. We can't fight blind against these things, we tried that before."

"We did and it cost us," Elspeths' expression was haunted as she pulled up her cloak, "we need a scouting party, small numbers will be harder for them to detect."

That a small number would be less crippling to the resistance if they were lost went unsaid and within an hour they were gone, a mix of former enemies forced together in this stand as Vulshok and Auriok were united. Leaving Venser, still recovering, to hold the base, the 'walkers led the mission, looking for any traces of the Phyrexians making another attack against those who had yet to undergo their monstrous phyresis. They found nothing, the watches set up to hunt the resistance were gone, leaving them stalking through empty and deserted tunnels, eerily quiet and echoing. There was something though, in the air, in the very soul of the corrupted plane; a change was afoot, something even those without the spark could detect. Moving swiftly but cautiously the tribesmen found evidence of their suspicious, empty husks of phyrexians or those that had been infected, scattered parts and decaying organic matter but not a trace, not even a drop of the deadly virus that had caused such misery. Coming onto the surface of the first circle of the plane they sought high ground and, from there, saw the first truth of what was going on, the new madness that had gripped their enemies.

On the surface of the plane was carnage, a mass-migration of murderous machines all driving headlong. This was no organised march, it was a headlong stampede on both land and sky - those that fell were crushed underfoot but even then their suffering did not end. The surface was slick with oil, the vector of the corruption oozing like it was alive towards a single point, the last place any in the plane would wish to travel, the legendary Vault of Ish-Sah.

Travelling in the wake of the march, alert for any hint of oil and alarmed as here and there it bubbled up from the lover levels the travellers went on to the outskirts of the Mephidross, the nim within either already fallen to or destroyed by the relentless Phyrexians,

"Can we go on?" Elspeth asked, overturning a smashed hulk with the tip of her blade, "Is the mist safe?"

"No but there are paths," one of the Moriok, a scavenger made a strange ally by the assault on their world, said, "the Vault's not impregnable, I have been there."

"Lead on," Koth said before spinning to face down the others, "those who do not want to follow can fall back and branded for their cowardice." It was enough to have most of them moving on, the scavenging artificer leading them through the cheerless place made even more desolate by the sweeping advance. The mist was ever-present, a stagnant, strangulating horror that more than one was lost to, though as the five suns shone it was Elspeth, keen-eyed and with the white sun overhead, who saw what awaited them,

"The Vault," she said, squinting into the distance, "what is that, atop it?" Koth was beside her, shading his eyes as he tried to pierce the murk surrounding the foreboding peak,

"I don't know, we must get closer."

"We can't," one of the Auriok reported, holding out a cracked but still serviceable spyglass, a great boon for the resistance, "they'll slice us down before we get close enough." Putting it to his eye and ignoring the large crack running down it the geomancer's armour flared in alarm, the others grabbing their weapons at the signal,

"What is it?"

"They, all of them have gathered," the Vulshok answered the knight, disbelieving at the sight arrayed before them and, at the core of his

molten heart, realising it was a hopeless battle, "they seek to launch a new sun, or corrupt one maybe?"

"I don't know," Elspeth admitted, seeing the large conglomeration gathering atop the vault, a huge, shimmering sphere of utter darkness that dwarfed the mountain pinnacle, "by why gather all their forces? See blue, black, all the praetors together, it doesn't make sense."

By cruel irony as those words left her lips the world changed; all saw the huge portal open, a hole in the sky framing Ish Sar and casting the shadow of the Phyrexian weapon into dreadful relief. All prayed, many falling to their knees as slowly, slowly the sphere was subsumed into the great maw, disappearing from view. They waited for the end of the world, the death of the plane, the two planeswalkers amongst them still standing defiant even if one was grateful for it to end. The seconds dragged on, cruel as Phyrexian surgery until as soon as it had come the portal was closed, disappearing in the blink of an eye and all was still until a the blast came sweeping from the mountain, blowing back Elspeths' hood and bringing doom in its wake,

"Necrogen!" The warning came too late, none had time to seek shelter or protection as the devouring mist swept over them like a living thing. Even as they held their breath or tried to drive it away with fire the fog infiltrated their lungs, choked off their breathing and made them, one by one, fall into nothingness.

Was this is the end, what she had longed for? It was a hazy, sickly yellow, everything seemed slowed in her eyes; she could see Koth's lips moving long before she registered his words. Swaying to her feet made the whole world tilt crazily, her stomach rebelling until she managed to control her nausea and steady the Vulshok who also forced himself upright,

"Where are we?" Her voice echoed in the still, the pale yellow disorientating as Koth shrugged,

"Don't know, we could be dead," he added helpfully, his gruff humour making the knight smile,

"Let's hope not," she lied, drawing her blade and stepping forwards, Koth at her shoulder and her challenge answered almost before she made it. Through the pale mist a shadow appeared, darkening as they stood ready, wondering if this was test of this strange realm as at last the figure took shape, a tall, relatively thin man but heavy with armour, many swords and a scythe slung over his back and made no less threatening by the bundle he cradled in his arms. Elspeth lowered her blade into a guard, Koth readying his deadly fists as the being came closer though he paused outside of blade range, looking from one to the other with eyes grey and cold as death. He did nothing but kneel, leaving the basket at his feet then, abruptly, stepped backwards, retreating into the mist as silently as he'd come,

"Wait," Koth's voice made him pause, "who are you?"

"No-one of importance," the voice was even more chill than his eyes, "that is important." He pointed at the bundle and Elspeth realised it was twitching as though something alive was within… her heart ceased beating,

"Is that…?"

"A dream," the stranger was fading, his voice echoing around them, "we will meet again, and we will see how close you hold that dream."

The echoes grew louder, so loud she fell to a knee, planting her blade in the ground to press her hands to her ears. A ring of metal on wire told her Koth had done the same but the noise was inside hear head, bouncing in her skull and nothing could still it - to preserve her sanity she slipped away into the darkness…

… and her eyes opened to the light blue of Mirrodin's sun, the blue orb spreading a calming radiance as she recovered consciousness. There was a faint breeze, the faintest whiff of necrogen as she slowly sat up, registering what was before her with a dry laugh,

"That's not a pretty sight Koth; what happened?" The Vulshok, on his hands and knees in front of her, didn't answer, shuffling towards something she couldn't see and kneeling when he got there. The pounding in her head receding Elspeth realised they must still be in the Dross, the mist must have blown right over them and knocked them into a dream. It would take time to recover from but at least it had been only a fleeting exposure, she had no desire to end her days as a ravenous, half-metal undead and made to get to her feet, speaking as she did,

"I'll rouse the others, we'd best be gone before that peak starts vomiting gas again. Koth, can you hear me?" Concerned by his silence the white mana user made to step forwards only to see him turning around on his knees; at the sight of what he now carried in his terrible hands her stomach dissolved to slush,

"No," she shook her head, disbelieving, "it can't have been real, the necrogen made us pass out!" The geomancer looked up at her, a spark of mana around his free hand and his expression struck with wonder and disbelief almost as profound as her own,

"She," he whispered, looking down at the baby left for them, "she, is Tiszta."

It was the Vulshok word for flawless and the baby, like but the direct opposite of Melira, had become a beacon of hope for the survivors of the shattered plane. She and Koth had been careful to never reveal her origins, claiming they had found her in the graveyard of the Phyrexians, the Mephidross surrounding the Vault carpeted with lifeless hulks, the war-machines left rusting in their waterlogged tomb. Remembering the young child she had bidden farewell to in the company of Koths' compound and the girl who more than anything wished to be Elspeths' squire before the conference began the knight readied herself for a struggle,

"So you do exist - was this part of your test, to mock us into making mistakes?"

"I care not for the scribblings," the warrior said, his voice as flat as his blade as he fell into a stance she was unfamiliar with, "I care for the dream. Now you," he looked between them, grey eyes narrowing, "show your worth."

Across a strange land and under an unfamiliar sky man was summoned, spells took form and battle began.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 - Duels of the Planeswalkers

For all their magic, their prowess hand to hand and the ability to traverse the planes of existence planeswalkers were, though few of them would admit it, flawed beings. Born mortal and ascended only by chance, usually a dark or life-threatening one, they were set apart by the spark but despite their connection to mana they were mortal beings who lived, loved and fell prey to the same vices as any other. These weaknesses were seldom tested; few who knew what they were dealing with would berate a planeswalker to their faces even if they were no longer the gods they once had been but, even so, there were flaws there for those who knew how to exploit them.

And of all flaws of the planeswalkers there was never one so common, or so costly, as arrogance.

Twisting her blade up and around again the shaman of the Revane tribe kept a hard grip on her temper as the human once more evaded a strike that should have split her in two. She had remarkable balance and dexterity, almost that of an elf, and a virtually prenatural knowledge of where she was going to strike, suffering little more than rips in her cloak as she evaded Nissa's constant offence; even the earth couldn't help her as, in close, she couldn't spare an instants' concentration to imbue her mana into the living soil and wood. Sweat trickling down her brow Nissa sped up even more, her lithe form dancing as her spear became a forest of points, each one ringing off the answering web of steel the human wove about herself,

"You're getting closer, almost cut my greave that time," Nissa snarled quietly, jumping back to gain some more room but unable to keep away, the human right behind her as her sword flashed, "not exactly

smart to get so close with a spear though - maybe next time you'll know better than to interrupt a civilised conversation."

"There is little humans do I would call civilised."

"Strange coming from a feral elf; no offense," plenty was taken but again Nissas' opponent was her match, speaking even as spear clashed against blade, "your, tribe's not known for, settling down."

"We're also not known for mercy to those who insult us," she riposted, "we leave them as bait for the beasts as even you should remember."

"I do remember," the woman mused, "hence why I had to change Sisna up a bit to make him likeable, though for the record I'm sorry I got the genders wrong. It's, well, I didn't exactly get a time for a good look at either of you; I flipped a coin and called it wrong."

"Apologise in blood," Nissa demanded, a pulse of mana through her feet making the grass under her opponent erupt into thorns, forcing her to jump away and granting the elf time to flick sweat from her brow before it could run down and sting her eyes as another voice, one she'd almost forgotten about, spoke over the lull in the fighting,

"What is your name?"

"Melanie Vynsacher; see Revane, politeness can get you a lot further than brutality can," the elf didn't even waste her breath in a snort of derision as the human focussed on the half-snake, "long time no see, though I never got your name either."

"Yet you have used a form of it; Skraav is Vraska written differently." Melanie smiled sheepishly,

"Okay you got me; I didn't know it when the Azorius came though, I found out later. Even the Golgari don't have many gorgons so it didn't take much digging."

"We are few," Vraska agreed before glancing at her companion, "please do not attack, I am talking." Nissa's ear twitched, the only sign of her aggravation as she spat,

"And I don't care to listen; this thing insulted me and I will have a blood-price."

"You will kill her?"

"Of course."

"Then will you eat her?" The bland question drowned Nissa's trepidation of the other planeswalker under disgusted shock,

"Loathsome beast, I am above such things." Vraska's symbiotes hissed, the elf taking a pace back,

"I am loathsome yet I kill only to eat or defend myself and my close ones; you murder for honour and valour and call yourself civilised? Your logic makes no sense."

"Hear, hear," the gorgon had an unexpected ally, Melanie clapping her hand against her sword arm in applause, "I tried to get that across in the print, how Skraav's nice even to the elf sent to kill her, I hope it came through alright."

"It did, though you are ill-informed about gorgon reproduction, we do not lay eggs contrary to popular belief."

"I know but Skraav had to have a reason for staying put, and anyway the bite you use wouldn't…"

"Enough!" Nissa had gone beyond her limited patience, "You care nothing for what you do or do not have snake-woman but I value the name of my clan and will not tolerate some stranger besmirching it and me. Now stop this pointless babbling and face me!"

Tapping into the earth to fortify her aggressive stance the elf lowered the tip of her spear towards the womans' heart, Melanie not moving

for a moment as she appeared shocked at the interruption, shock that would be the death of her as the ground under her feet split asunder, gaping jaws of mud rising up smother her opponent. She noticed too late the flash of mana, a pearlescent blue that shone under the humans' feet before agony exploded in her midriff, folding her up like a punctured bladder-bulb as she was hurled away by the impact, a second agonising slap to the back of her hand making her lose her grip on her spear. She hit the ground hard several feet away but natural agility honed by years of survival from before Zendikars' Calming had her roll to her feet in an eye-blink, pain already fading as the soothing touch of green mana as she beheld her opponent commit sacrilege, the human daring to place her hand on the weapon she had claimed upon surviving her tribes' ritual into adulthood,

"I've had enough of you," the humans' eyes, once sparkling green, were now dull, her ash-grey hair swaying in the wind, "you think we're barbarians and monsters compared to you elves Princess? Fine; hold these Vraska," Nissa was forced to watch in horror as blasphemy was added to insult, her staff thrown to the gorgon along with the humans' sword as the other mage raised her fists, fury burning in her gaze,

"This barbarian is going to give you a beating you'll never forget!"

Please Ula, Cozi and Emeria I'll do my salutations every day - I found your temple Ula and I'm sorry I swore there, I'll go back and pay homage a hundred times if don't let Gideon get hurt.

The fight was like a Roil storm, so terrible you should look away but too enthralling to even blink from, the two warriors so swift it seemed three gaffs were fending off blazing white lashes without number. She'd seen Gideon practise and half-listened when he told her of mana and how it had to be respected before she could hope to use it - now she wished she'd listened harder, so much harder as the white mage stood like a sea cliff, his whip blurring around him and snapping at the twirling, dancing Kor. The mergirl had seen Gideon

fight before, and seen the sural put to other uses such as escaping from temple traps or, if there was money on it, snatching three separate bottles off a bar top and depositing them in front of those who requested them but she'd never seen his full strength, the mana he was unleashing both majestic and fearsome. Jhon'ee was equally as strong, her gaff knocking away the sural's questing heads and sparks of blue flying into most of the white mana structures the hieromancer weaved, destabilising them before they could take effect. Biting her lip, trying to think of some way to help and cursing herself for being so weak that she couldn't, Kiora was too far away to see the small figure that ended the battle before it was too late.

The Kor was a fearsome warrior and skilled, far more skilled than he was at shaping and casting mana, the oceans' strength undermining the formulas of his orthodoxy magic. This battle would be won or lost at close quarters and Jhon'ee was a frustratingly defensive fighter, her fishing gaff able to keep his sural at bay and the Kor herself born to the sand, the loose footing not slowing her down as it did him. Snapping the steel lash and planning his next moves as the crash of an abnormally large wave drowned out his battle psalm the hieromancer was distracted, just for an instant, by a familiar flash of blue-green trying to sneak up behind his opponent, coming in from the Kors' left; *Kiora!* If he got out of this alive he was going to drown her, he wasn't sure how but he'd figure it out later as he desperately twisted his lash, seeking to goad Jhon'ee into circling away from the merfolk girl.

It was a gambit that failed; in an acrobatic combination she rolled under one head, knocked another away with the butt of her hooked spear and pulled her stomach in to avoid the white blaze the third shot at her, the hindering light earthing harmlessly behind her; *damn it!* No choice now, Kiora was running straight towards her, looking to tackle her around the knees and Jhon'ee, focussed solely on the fight, would hit her, maybe even kill her without realising she'd done it - he flicked his wrist, sacrificing his defence and sending the last tip of his sural out, the Kor dodging past it and towards him as it hit the running merfolk in the stomach and passed straight through her.

An illusion.

A bastard illusion and he'd fallen right for it!

Had his life not been in danger he would have been impressed; as it was years of training from both before and after his ascension let him pull off the only move the tactician before him didn't expect. She was within the sweep of his sural and her gaff was already coming down, whatever he did was going to hurt so he would make sure it hurt her more than him. Dropping the whip he focussed mana into his off-hand, relishing the panic in his opponents' eyes as her blow was too late to stop. Pain shot through his right arm as the hook of her weapon bit into it like a nail, cleanly going in one side of his bicep and out the other but he was used to pain and it didn't stop him reaching forwards and gripping her arm with his left hand. Chains of binding white mana wrapped around her and she was too close to counter him, he held on through the excruciation and snarled as he realised she too had a last-ditch gambit.

Abandoning her weapon she snatched a knife from her belt Gideon, even while concentrating on his spell just able to shift his arm enough that Jhon'ee merely scratched the back of his hand with its tip. Just before the binding completed the hieromancer looked into the Kor's face, her determined but regretful gaze and her mouthing the words 'well won' the last he saw of her before it exiled her within a circle of gold. With his foe vanquished he sagged a little, battle-fever fading and the pain of his wounds catching up, along with an odd tingle from his left hand that he guessed meant nothing good,

"Gideon!" The metal hook in his arm stopped him turning around so he looked over his shoulder, trying to put a brave face on his pain as Kiora came to a dead halt, hand clasped over her mouth,

"Were you always that green?" He quipped lamely, his humour lost on the trembling girl,

"You've got a gaff in your arm!"

"I know, now look away," he braced himself for more pain, forcing his left hand towards the head of the embedded weapon,

"No, it has to go out as it came in," the mergirl shrieked, fear he'd do himself even more damage overcoming revulsion as she stepped closer to him, "I, I'll do it."

"You can't reach."

"Kneel down, or squat," she croaked, reaching for the butt of the weapon and not looking at him, "I've used these for years, I know what I'm doing." Gideon's nod let a lead weight fall into her stomach, his voice resonating like a bell in her head,

"Remember when you have to act, act…"

."..Without pause," Kiora second-guessed him, the saying not hiding the feeling of wood in her palms or quelling the nausea roiling in her gut; *it's just like a fish, just a fish - push forwards and up and it slides out* ; "one, two, three!"

She pushed forwards and up, the hook slid free cleanly and Gideon fell to his knees, left hand clapped across the now-spurting hole as the veins stood out in his neck, a strangled gargle all he allowed himself to express at the white-hot needle coring his muscle. Existence flashed white, then blue, then red, he barely felt the impact into his side until at last the tide of agony receded and he was able to focus on the shivering little bundle now burrowed into his uninjured side,

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry this is my fault; I shouldn't have let you follow me! I'm bad luck, I should have run away!" Trying to staunch the bleeding Gideon managed to drop an elbow on top of her head, looking to stop the recriminations before they could begin,

"Don't be stupid…"

"They should have thrown me to the Roil; I'm cursed, I'm a curse on…"

"Kiora!" He very rarely shouted and she listened when he did, turning her watering gaze onto him as he breathed, in and out, to master his pain and speak calmly, "We don't have time, the others could be in danger. I need you to bandage my arm and what were you talking about, the Roil?" She bit he lip, sniffing hard as she withdrew from under his arm, reaching in to one of the pouches at his belt for the bandages he habitually carried along with flint, tinder and other sundries needed for life,

"A Roil tide came just after I was born, took half my school, my father. I should have been thrown out to appease it but, my mother, outcast because she wouldn't, because of me. We were alone until she told me what she'd done; I left, swam away so she could go back."

"And Ula's temple?"

"I heard drunk landlings saying about it; thought, if I could give her statue to my school, they wouldn't think I was bad luck," she stopped, shivering as he slowly uncovered his injury, the bleeding sluggish but not stopped as she began wrapping the cloth around it, tears coming again as she went on, "Halimar, was trying to get there when I got caught by that bitch! I should have swum away so you…"

."..I," Gideon cut in, his voice strong after he swallowed a lump in his throat; *the Tidal Wave was sprung from sorrow - I was truly blessed in my life* ; "would still have a gaff in my arm if you weren't here, that doesn't sound like bad luck to me."

"It is; she made something look like me and she hurt you and even on Zendikar I was bad, didn't listen. I'm a curse, Roil-spawned; you should hate me," she hissed brokenly before stiffening; Gideon had thrown his numbing left arm around her and in his embrace the Wave of Zendikar trembled even harder, face screwed up to deny tears,

"You are not cursed, you are not bad luck and I will *never* hate you; every shrine, every trap, every step I took behind you on Zendikar I would take again gladly. I don't want to hear you say anything like that again, promise me."

"But, Jhon'ee…"

"Was a very skilled mage attuned to the sea, I should have expected mirages; now promise me," he demanded, releasing the mergirl only when he heard her murmur her agreement and regarding her as severely as he could, "you know how seriously I take a promise?" At her nod he smiled, grateful to see the expression echoed on her face as his old training resurfaced,

"Good, now we need to get out of here and find the others. Get my sural."

She nodded, quickly dragging the steel lash out of the sand and helping him wrap it around his waist as he couldn't use his arms. The bare trickle of mana he could channel without his hands was enough to keep him on his feet and resolute, the strength of the fields helping numb the poison and the pain as Kiora glanced up at the remnant of his spell,

"What did you do?"

"It's an imprisonment," the hieromancer explained, flexing his left hand and grimacing; *I can barely hold a dagger never mind my sural* ; "while it's in place she can't escape."

"Why didn't you…?"

"Because I didn't need to; I've told you taking a life should be the last resort and I mean it. Besides, she didn't want to kill me," the Kor's face and the truth within it passed in front of him again as he glanced down at the mergirl, Kiora stunned as he explained, "if she wanted me dead she'd have swung for my neck, not my arm. Anyway it's done now, we have to go."

"Right, which way?"

"Inland; we'd see or hear others fighting on the beach but we've no idea where they've been sent." He set off, not seeing the mergirl stoop by the side of his containment spell for a second before catching up, falling in on his right side to catch him if he fell. The beach quickly fell away to rolling bluffs, the two staying low with Kiora ranging ahead due to her size and colouring until a sudden bellow to the left, a long way away, made her rush back to Gideons' side, her fright met with his stoicism as he realised the most likely reason for the rising, echoing roar.

It was the noise a beast might make if enraged, or afraid.

Who the hell ; as she dodged backwards from flensing steel and forced her opponent away with a jet of flame Chandra snatched a breath, grateful her eyewear was designed to not fog up; *made this bitch fireproof?*

Fortunately a flickering wisp distracted her opponent, Exava leaping after the Guildpact with a frenzied smile and suggestions so lewd the pyromancers' toes curled. Mentally swearing to deliver their champion back to the Rakdos in an urn she paused, heeding an unspoken message; what they were using so far hadn't worked, it was time to get creative.

Exava was different, much more dangerous than they'd ever seen her before, quite an achievement for a Rakdos. Whatever drugs were coursing through her system had her flipping around like a Simic creation in boiling water, damned near impossible to hit and her mental state, precarious to begin with, so degraded Jaces' illusions were having little effect. Aside from tearing open the odd phantasm as it flew towards her she was also surprisingly clinical, sparing little or no effort to dodge the varied spells the two mages were throwing towards her as she appeared immune to them. That shock had cost Chandra as the mad banshee charged through a curtain of flame unharmed, Jaces' bolt of force blasting the blood-

witch away before her maimed hand gave her more than a scratch. Fire that would have turned steel to slag seemed to fade around her, negating a lot of Chandra's options but she wasn't conceding; Jace always had a plan,

" *Now, while she's distracted* ."

" *On it*," evening her breathing the red mage ignored the danger Jace was in to focus her fire into a new shape, a new form birthed with a keening cry. Glad as her phoenix swept over the battlefield Chandra raced after the pair of them, guided by the maddening cackle of their opponent,

"First your fingers, then your nose, then your eyelids, then your toes"; *and that's still better than what they played at her club* ; "I like your face Guildpact, I'll like it even more stuffed and mounted." From the distance she saw Jaces' hand shimmer blue, concentrating as the signal was given,

"Shame, I never liked yours Exava," Jace admitted, a gleaming spiders' web springing up between them but, somehow, split apart by her ever-gripped knife; *a manablade of some kind? That's not good* ; he had no good memories of such weapons and if someone had given this maniac one they had to stop her here, "just as well it's leaving now."

Her look of confusion was one he'd remember forever as a wake of flame passed overhead, the summoned bird of fire and rage latching onto her shoulders and dragging her aloft, her curses and screams fading slightly as she was pulled into the air. Recovering slightly and focussing to pull a little mana from the distant sea he could feel he suddenly ducked as there was a loud blast above him, scorching warmth on his back as the phoenix detonated. *The way she would have wanted to go* ; the thought made him chuckle grimly as he turned towards the distant figure of his friend, the first true one he'd had in many years, only to squint at her expression - it was hard to tell through her lenses but she looked almost…

"Jace"… afraid, "that wasn't me!" It took a few seconds to sink in, a few seconds too long as several small dark spheres flew over his head and a shadow fell over him. Spinning, knowing it was already too late, Jace had time for a last regret as the smoking, fire-blackened thing plunged towards him, blade outstretched; *I won't be writing any more denouements for you, I'm sorry Chandra* .

Unaware of her friends' peril the fire mage was prone on the ground, hands over her ears and mouth open as she'd recognised the small metal containers spinning through the air. The small bombs had been badly-aimed but they hardly needed to be accurate to kill - who the hell was giving that guild explosives? As the earth ceased juddering she threw herself to her feet, vision still sepia through her goggles as a puff of wind blew the smoke away,

"Jace," she called, trying to bank down her rising fear as she remembered the shape falling towards him; if Exava had survived and landed close enough… she couldn't think of it, "Jace, talk to me."

" *Chandra,"* relief hit her like a punch in the guts, *"run* ." That was a punch from a giant, her very core chilled as the smoke blew away. Jace stood ramrod straight with a dagger under his jaw, the Rakdos with her legs scissoring his waist and her chin on his shoulder; it might have been sensual had she not been black with soot and grinning psychotically. Her mouth ran dry, heart palpitating wildly as Exava rubbed her cheek against the mind-mages,

"A legal bind," she cackled madly at her own joke, Jace shivering but otherwise unable to move, his telepathy useless against someone with a mind so base and broken, "let's cut it open and see what falls out."

"No!" Chandra stepped forward,

" *Run you idiot!* "

"Shut up," she demanded aloud, realising her mistake only when the dagger pushed up harder, puckering the flesh of the mind-mages' jaw as Exava tutted,

"No, no shhhh, I am talking; I hate the pact, the peace, where's the fun without anarchy? So I will break the pact, I will break him."

"And all you have ever known will end if you do," the blood-witch looked up as Chandra lifted her goggles, letting her see the topaz jewels her eyes had become as she delivered her promise, "kill him, hell hurt him and I will return to Ravnica and put the Rakdos to the torch, every club, every riot, every cultist. Your guild will be ashes, its name a hex; you think you've seen fire bitch," suddenly she was ablaze, every blade of grass within thirty feet shrivelling as she regarded her quarry with a glare like the suns' fury,

"Hurt Jace Beleren and I will show you what it means to *burn* !"

It wasn't for show, not all of it; from what Chandra knew of the Rakdos their champions were thrill-killers, berserkers who cared little if they lived or died as long as they made a good spectacle. By making herself the biggest threat possible she might be able to lure the blood-witch into dropping her captive to hunt her, a plan that half-worked as Exava's glassy eyes focussed for a second. Her fiery form was reflected in their engorged pupils as she licked her lips, then she nuzzled closer to her prisoners' neck, words Chandra couldn't hear taking effect as a trickle of mana flowed into Jaces' ear; *she's a caster now! Oh great* ; this made a bad situation even worse as the cultist dismounted her stolen ride and pushed gently, Jace unable to catch himself as he fell flat on his face,

"Ah, the Guildpact falls, he is hurt," and there was a smear of blood on Jace's chin, cut by a sharp rock as Exava grinned, "show me your fire!"

Chandra did, twin blades of flame flaring in her hands as she rushed forwards, unable to risk her larger spells in case she caught the other planeswalker in the disaster radius. With a wild laugh Exava

sprang to meet her, the single knife and her strange protection for the tongues of flame preventing Chandra score a lasting hit but that was never the intention. Kicking out she caught her enemy on the knee, Exava not even feeling the blow that made her stumble but that was immaterial; before she could recover Chandra was where she needed to be, Jace behind her and facing her opponent, smirking,

"Now I've got the Pact."

"Good," it was her smile, cruel and cold as opposed to her usual madcap grin, which made Chandra's skin prickle; when she cast aside part of her robe the firebrands' hair all but stood up; *bombs? No* ; the thought of being outwitted by this madwoman chilled her as Exava pulled a pin with the tip of her fire-melded blade; *she wanted us to switch places!* ;

"Let's play catch!"

After his first blade had scratched Venser the assassin had ripped the caul from their eyes, their underestimation of him their undoing. Before the trio could even gather mana he was amongst them, quickness and skills they'd never seen or suspected catching them unprepared; Venser had been first tripped and was now strangled by his lashing tail as he skilfully sliced apart a blizzard of paper cranes Tamiyo's scrolls set upon him as she alighted to the air. He snarled after her, keeping the last of the three within his sight as she picked herself up from where she'd fallen as he tightened his grip on his captive,

"Stupid-man dying Moon Sage," he chattered, beckoning the floating soratami with his blade, "you come down, I let him and other go." She didn't move, remaining in the sky with her kami-blessed paper shields about her as she watched the humans' struggles grow weaker, biting her lip - she had no wish to lose her head but at the same time Venser was innocent in this affair and had saved her from the assassin many times before; could she pass into the cloud-gates

with his blood on her hands? Even as she wrestled with the karmic question it was answered, another coming forwards who had already suffered too much,

"Leave him alone," Kaguya's voice was soft but determined as she stepped forwards, the nezumi watching her warily, "you don't like killing Splay-Paw-san, you could have killed Tamiyo-san before."

"Was no need, now is," the nezumi replied, brandishing his weapon threateningly, "stay back cloud-gaze." The soratami smiled slightly at his name; he had never been able to meet her changed eyes, thinking them bad luck; *and, considering how often I saw him coming, he was right* ;

"No Splay-Paw-san, I will not," she stepped forwards again, ignoring Tamiyo's calls and Vensers frantic, if feeble, gestures to go back, "if you want to kill her, I must die first."

"Then," the nezumi lowered his blade, looking down before his head snapped up, teeth bared as he lunged forwards, "die-die!"

Tamiyo gasped, her prepared spell slipping from her mind as she saw the other soratami slump, the rat-mans' blade finding its mark. She had never thought, barely even considered their lives were in danger from the inept ninja, now an innocent was dead; she should have gone back to Oboro, hunted down those responsible for sending assassins after her. *And I will* ; though she knew little offensive magic she knew enough to see her friend avenged; *I will find them all and slit their throats at their executions myself! I will carve the name Kaguya on the temple of the grandfathers… what?*

Only her attunement to the mana of the clouds let her sense it, the faintest tickling of mist gathering atop the back of the now-dead soratami who was changing before them. Her shock was echoed in Venser's purpling face as the nezumi squealed, realising his peril too late; Kaguya's flesh hardened to wood and grew, the mana of the earth and water combining to let branches and tendrils ensnare their

foe. As he was caged in living branches the ground beneath the Moon Sage shifted, the real Kaguya emerging and looking severe,

"So you would kill me Splay-Paw-san; so be it," she gestured, mana of a different hue fortifying her creation and the nezumi squealed again, this time in pain as the black mana sprouted thorns in his prison. As he lashed to free himself Venser was at least able to heave himself free of the tail that had nearly killed him, heaving down a breath as scrolls whispered around him, Tamiyo's creations shielding him from reflexive lashes of the appendage as she returned to the earth, looking at the older planeswalker with new respect,

"Kaguya-chan, you have never shown that spell before."

"It is not strictly a spell," she admitted, opening her palm to show a handful of seeds, "I was once a gardener; I have never forgotten my craft." The Moon Sage smiled, bowing deeply from the waist,

"Should you ever wish to return to Oboro all its lands and gardens will be put at your disposal."

"And I'll be the first to visit," Venser added as he stood up, still a little croaky as he rubbed his throat, the vision of the gardener's supposed death making his normally warm gaze cold as he gathered mana into his palm, "now let me get rid of this thing."

Still trapped and impaled the nezumi snarled, snapping at the plants entangling him futiley before, in desperation, he curled his tail in and chattered something in a high tone none had heard him speak before. Her research giving her a rough idea of the nezumi tongue Tamiyo realised what he was doing but was too late to stop him, her smothering mist landing just as the assassin seemed to vanish, slipping between shadows and escaping his demise at Venser's hand, the artificer dispersing the mana before it hit Kaguya's simulacrum. Her eyes were already alight, the veins protruding as her blessed vision saw all, trying to locate their escaped aggressor,

"He is beyond my sight."

"We've got time then," Venser said quickly, regarding the now-empty plant the soratami's mana had grown with awe; able to plait together four colours, Kaguya had the greatest breadth of strength he'd ever seen in a planeswalker even if she could only channel it through wood, grass and trees, "what was that?"

"Kanji-magic, shadow spells," Tamiyo explained, eyes on the surrounding area and grateful they weren't in a wood or otherwise shaded area, "he must have written one in blood and activated it to escape."

"Then we should do the same before he comes back; we need the others, I know…" The sojourner was cut off by a sudden gasp from Kaguya, the soratami still with her eyes open as she turned to him,

"Your friends, I see them over there."

"We go," Tamiyo answered for them, kanji flying from her scrolls and branding themselves onto the clothes of her friends, allowing the wind to bear them aloft, "lead the way Kaguya-san, we will find them and if that pestilential assassin returns," she raised her arms and bore them away, her last words left as a challenge,

"He will regret signing that contact for my head."

They were borne away, much faster in the air than over land, the tree nurtured by the soratami gardener quickly left behind and out of sight as, a moment later, a whiskered snout emerged from its shadow, sniffing the air and followed by the rest of the nezumi as he realised they were gone. Tracking their likely progress he paused only to recover his weapon and chew on a sprig of mint-grass, smiling slightly as he made to go after them.

This hunt was far from over.

"What took you so long?"

Blocking out the Vulshok's grim humour Venser raced across the sand, momentarily forgetting the soratami at his heels as he took in the two prone figures lying conjoined before him. He mapped out the battle while assessing its aftermath; scuffs in the sand indicating tight footwork, blasted and vitrified patches showing the power of geomancy and, worse, the trench Koth had dug as he dragged himself finger-length by agonising finger-length to throw his maimed arm over his friend. Diving onto his knees and grimacing as he saw the Hammer tribe leaders' forearms pierced cleanly, he couldn't help but demand answers,

"What the hell happened?"

"We lost."

"Details; this'll hurt."

"Do it," the Vulshok grimaced, his metallic hair clicking in pain as Venser's mana began slowly repairing the damage his arms had suffered, "it was him Venser, the man from the mists was real."

"But how…?"

"Never mind," just like with the resistance, questions not devoted to warfare could be answered later, "your enemy?" Venser checked over his shoulder, grateful to see his companions at his back with their eyes out for danger,

"Gone for now, don't know how long for though; who was he?"

"Didn't get his name," even through the pain of being partially reforged, Koth somehow managed to laugh gutturally before turning serious, "he knows Venser, he told us the truth about her, about Tiszta."

"Later…"

"No, it broke Elspeth," the Vulshok broke off to glare at the woman partially under him, "she swore she was better, she swore it!"

Venser nodded, glancing at the fallen knight with a heavy heart; more than once during the darkest days of Mirrodin he'd heard crying from her quarters, seen her practice until she could no longer lift her blade and watched her stalk off to be alone for many long hours, trying to outrun some doom that dogged her heels. Following the end of the invasion and the rebuilding beginning she'd been happier than he'd ever seen her, even more so when she'd taken Melira under her wing, but he sensed that even the end of the Phyrexian threat hadn't truly brought her the peace she craved,

"What did he say?" The artificer didn't truly want to know; he was the only one the other two planeswalkers had trusted with the truth of Tiszta's origins and if the truth was enough to shatter a woman as formidable as Elspeth Tirel it was something to be dreaded,

"She's a machine, my fleck is the perfect machine," Koth said, pain lacing his tone as he thought about the little girl waiting with his compound for her father to return, "she's all metal as Melira is all flesh. We knew this but we did not know the rest - she's like us Venser, she bears the aether's mark."

"That's impossible," the mere thought made the artificers' skin crawl in both disbelief and, in a strange way, hope; since his mentor had fallen, the silver golem left hollow and destroyed by the removal of the glistening oil that had finally corrupted him, there were no others like him that bore the spark, "even Karn was made a planeswalker."

"But Karn didn't live, Tiszta does - she eats, sleeps and feels, she cannot be told from flesh," his arms repaired by the artificer Koth brought his hand to his face, "and she was never the dream of Mirrodin."

"Who would…" the Vulshock shifted and Venser stopped dead, seeing the dread brand and remembering for the first time in ages

the tales of his homeland, the other name it bore, ."..he lied, he must have; their Father is dead!"

"He has never lied - a machine with a spark, the dream of Yawgmoth himself," Koths' tears were burning as they slid down his face, his voice quiet and choked, "the perfect Phyrexian."

Venser felt dislocated, torn from reality - he wanted to deny it, to shake the Vulshok by the shoulders until he said it wasn't the truth but it was never going to happen; Koth wouldn't lie about his daughter; *and he wouldn't be the worst affected* ;

"Elspeth," as Koth made to sorely stand up, testing the repairs made to his arm the artificer saw her properly for the first time and felt his guts twist. Physically she was well but her eyes were blank, seeing nothing and she didn't react as he held her, limp as a doll with her sword lying in the sand. Following his gaze Koth grimly finished his account of their battles' aftermath,

"He told us as we were fighting just as I told you; when she realised she fell, just, fell. He left her, focussed on me and he was strong; red mana here is weaker, I couldn't stop him with the earth and hand to hand," he glanced at the discoloured metal on his arms, "he's as deadly as she is."

"Where is he now?"

"That way," the voice made them both jump, Kaguya's tread so light they hadn't heard her approach, "travelling inland." A thrill ran up Vensers' spine,

"He's going for the others!"

"And we have to stop him; get her sword," Koth scooped Elspeth up, Kaguya picking the weapon from its sandy tomb gingerly just as a flock of paper flew overhead, Tamiyo joining them and conjuring the same marks as before as she spoke,

"The clouds have shown me where we have been scattered to; those maps should tell the others."

"How far?"; *finally* ; Vensers' relief was palpable; *some good news* ;

"Not very, I saw your enemy Koth-san, I know his likely route," she held out one of the maps she'd hastily scrawled and the Vulshok scrutinised it before jabbing part of it with a metal finger,

"Can you get us there?" The soratami nodded, gesturing her shining kanji to affix to them all, the effort taxing her as they rose,

"I will cloak our passage," Kaguya breathed, a small stream of mist issuing from her sleeves and chilling the air around them, her eyes guiding them where others would be thwarted by their cover as, together in the mist, the planeswalkers moved on to stop one of their enemies.

One of the effects of the process that had birthed her was that she barely remembered the human woman she had once been; the bite of her sire had changed her mind as well as her body. Because of this Vraska knew a lot of the time she came across as insensitive but what she said was usually justified, hence why she felt no shame as she made her observation about the two-being knot in front of her,

"That looks remarkably painful."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a master of understatement Vraska?" The victor of the fist-fight laughed, pulling backwards on her opponents' arms as, on her knees and kept there by the humans' sandals pressing out the back of them, the elf tensed in agony,

"Once or twice," the gorgon admitted before glancing at the pinned shaman, "you might as well concede, you're just going to hurt yourself more." Nissa snarled and then stiffened, more pressure strangling her retort as Mel spoke for her,

"You're wasting your time; you know what these prideful folk are like Vraska. I'm sure she's got a plan - I mean how could a pitiful human like me beat a great and powerful elf like her, and of the Joraga tribe to boot, the best of the best of the Multiverse? She's probably trying to work out how I cheated as we speak and don't waste your breath asking her to show sense; she'd rather die than admit defeat to someone other than another pointy-ear. We could be here a while unless, of course, I'm wrong; what do you say elf, ready to give in yet?"

Trying to force her mana into the soil but blocked by the blue ribbon the human had wended around her it was all Nissa could do to shake her head; she was bruised and beaten but, even with her arms screaming for relief, she would never concede,

"Fine; bored now - I'm ending this," Nissa's mask of suffering became even more pronounced as the human leant down, more weight on the back of her knees grinding them into the forest floor. Her arms were locked out, she couldn't bend them as the woman reached down and looped one arm around both her captives' elbows, leaving her a hand free. She braced herself for more pain, so much so that the feather-light touches that suddenly raced along her ear made her gasp,

"Oh, sensitive are they? I always wondered about that," Mel admitted freely, continuing to fondle the keen organ as the shaman of the Joraga tribe bit her lip, quivering at the ambivalent sensations of pain and pleasure, "so if I did this," she twisted the tip and Nissa couldn't stop a faint mewl of suffering, "yes, that should work. Tweaky, tweaky; I wonder if I can pull one longer than the other?"

"Enough," Vraska's rasp broke into the conversation, the gorgon taking a decisive step forwards, "there's no need for this Mel Vynsacher; you've won."

"Well two out of three of us figured that much out; listen Vraska I like you and I really mean that; you're not judgemental even to folk who'd damn you in an instant. I know what that's like and that," Nissa

hissed, tears clustering at the corner of her eyes as her ear was yanked unmercifully, "is why I can't stand people like Princess here. We've met before haven't we elf; want to tell her what happened, what you tried to do to me just because I was there and I wasn't one of you? Speak or I'll pull your ear off and stab you in the eye with it, on my oath as a warrior I will!"

"You," Nissa managed as the pain at the side of her head finally ebbed, "you were on our lands…"

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why was I on your lands?"

"I, I don't know…"

"Exactly, you didn't even ask; I was just there and I wasn't a hoity-toity forest-dweller so the only thing I was good for was worm-bait. I could have been lost, I could have been a messenger - hell I could have been coming to warn you of your forthcoming doom it wouldn't have mattered, you'd have had me for fertiliser anyway. She tried to kill me Vraska, kill me for just existing; you've been there haven't you, people wanting you dead for being what you are - what would you do if you were me now?"

"Beaten her as you have done, but," the gorgon raised a hand, looking between the elf and the girl who had her pinned, "I know humiliation as well as I know hate; I wouldn't have anyone else suffer either. You've beaten her, there's no need for any more."

"You'd stop me?"

"If I must, honour isn't worth dying for."

"I doubt Princess agrees - are you really willing to save someone who hates you?"

"Revane close your eyes." Remembering the legends she did as she was bid, pride abandoned for survival as she heard the hated human speak again,

"You'd really, wow, you're not joking are you? Have you ever used it before, on a person I mean?"

"Four times, each of them regretted but necessary."

"Well let's not strike though that tally-gate here, she's not worth it," Nissa's knees and elbows sobbed in relief as the pressure was lifted, then she was shoved face-first into the dirt, pinned by a sandal as a voice growling in her throbbing ear, "I want you to remember this Princess, remember that a barbarian beat you and a loathsome beast you wouldn't spit on stood up for you. You consider yourself and your fellow elves the pinnacle of the Multiverse, you're not worth the dust on Vraska's feet; her politeness and her defending you are the only reasons you're free, think about that. Toss us my sword please."

"If I throw it over there will you be offended; I would be tempted to leave a scar or scratch."

"So you're not above petty revenge then? Fine, toss it that way, I've got places to be; Spikes, Mr Whiskers and Lady Stabbington are probably going overboard and Uncle Timmy can't be everywhere at once."

None of those names filled Vraska with any confidence so she quickly threw the sheathed blade into the forest, Mel giving her beaten opponents' arm one last twist before scampering after it, quickly lost to sight amid the trees as the gorgon glanced down at the prone elf,

"You're not dead," when this got no response Vraska, running out of patience and worried for her friends, prodded the shaman with the butt of her spear, "get up, we have to find the others."

"Leave me alone," Nissa's voice was flat as she turned her head away, bile swirling in her belly as humiliation burned like a physical wound. Fortunately this pain faded a few seconds later, unfortunately this was because she was being hauled up by the hair, her watering eyes impaled by Vraska's cold stare,

"We don't have time for your self-pity; why did you lose?"

"What?" The question was so unexpected Nissa stopped kicking at the gorgon regarding her,

"Why did you lose; I ask myself that question, or a variant of it, when someone defeats me as my friends often do. How did Melanie beat you - answer me." The reminder of her defeat stung worse than her bruises and both were less painful than her next admission,

"She, she used a spell I didn't see and disarmed me, and…"

"She was faster, stronger and more skilled in brawling than you are?" Vraska supplied helpfully, the elf looking away but, reluctantly, nodding as much as she was able to, "So how will you not lose next time?"

"I," Nissa's jaw worked soundlessly; never before had she been lectured like this, "I, get faster, and stronger, or use my casting?"

"That would be sensible; I'm going to let go now, do not attack me," the gorgon did so and, to Nissas' surprise, offered her back her spear, "you can use this better than me. We must find the others; I do not like the names Melanie gave us assuming they're friends of hers."

Her stave was a comforting weight, the sting of her humiliation dulling a little as Vraskas' words forced her to take stock almost against her will; *beaten, but the lesser was more skilled in close-quarters - I, should not have fought her there* . But she'd been so sure she would win, so certain she couldn't lose and reality had given her a slap in the face; she could have easily died by either

Mels' blade or her hand if not for Vraska stepping in. She was so caught up by her realisation it wasn't until a hissing something passed almost under her chin she snapped back to reality, jumping and unable to stop the reflexive quiver,

"Apologies," there may have been a trice of bitterness in the chafing tone, "I assume you can track?"

"I can and, it is not you."

"What is not?" Nissa swallowed; she was not in the habit of divulging secrets to less… those who weren't elves,

"I was bitten, as a child, I've feared snakes ever since - I know you are not a snake but…"

"You are far from the first to assume that; later, we must move."

"Yes, this way; I hear something," despite Mels' attentions her hearing was as keen as ever, "it sounds like… I don't know the word. Humans use them to celebrate, loud explosions of colour."

"Fireworks, we have them on Ravnica. Lead on Revane, I will follow you."

"Nissa," even as she made to ask the shaman explained, "Revane is my tribe-name - call me Nissa. The noise is this way."

They ran through the forest, the noise getting louder with each step and though Vraska was so sluggish it forced her almost to a jogging pace Nissa didn't let the gorgon fall out of her sight. Though she was a witness to her defeat she wasn't the cause of it, nor had she gloated; she hadn't even asked for payment for, rescuing her. Slowing her pace to let the other being catch up Nissa felt the most pressing question weigh down on her until, as the continual bangs became loud enough to for even… for a human to hear, she dropped to the gorgons' shoulder and asked,

"Why did you step in; I have been, discourteous to you."

"All are equal in the Swarm; that is to say," though she'd been making progress under Chandras' guidance, as a new planeswalker Vraska sometimes forgot not everyone was familiar with Ravnica, "we all rot the same when the time comes. I know what it's like to be treated with scorn, as though I was nothing - it is not something I would wish on anyone."

"I, see; thank you"; the words came surprisingly easily, Nissa left reeling a little; *she sounded almost, profound* . Despite herself the elf felt a rush of, if not sympathy, then at least understanding towards the other planeswalker; when this was ended, she decided, she would talk more with the gorgon but, as they saw light ahead, she put that aside to focus on the explosions and other noises they could hear. Even at a distance she could see the trio of figures and, from the stiffness in Vraskas' posture and the hissing of her hair, she guessed the gorgon recognised the two she did not,

"Who are the others aside from Jace Beleren?"

"The woman defending him is Chandra Nalaar, my friend; the one she is fighting is Exava."

"You know her?"

"Only by reputation; she is a mad cultist of my plane who hates both of them. We have to help them, I think Jace is injured," that much Nissa agreed with; even humans weren't so foolish as to lie flat when people were throwing dangerous things at them, "Exava is not like Melanie, she will go for the kill. It would be unwise to get close, she is dangerous and those explosives would likely do much damage."

"Then we need a clean kill; your eyes, how far can you cast your gaze?"

"Not that far, and Chandra might be caught by it." Nissa thought for a moment before nodding; it would cost her pride but, as she had

already learned in pain, this was a place they could ill-afford it,

"I have an idea; stay here and don't move or this enchantment will break…"

The earth screamed, he told it to be quiet as he funnelling more mana into the never-ending void levitating just above it. He could barely feel his hands, now sunk deep into the soft sod, hoping both someone friendly and no-one unfriendly heard his call; it was distasteful to ask for help but, given what might happen if he stopped the flow of mana, he could ill-afford to spurn it. Garruk enjoyed his simple life, matching his wits, skills and ferocity against the beasts he hunted, relishing either the kill or binding those he brought to bay. He was a hunter primarily, his use of mana generally restricted to maintaining control of the pack or strengthening his own formidable ferocity but nature was adaptable and thus so was he; *and just as well.* The stink of blood and corruption was still heavy on the air, the rot-woman was wracked from within by whatever their rival had done and suspended by the cushion of green he was channelling, the life-giving mana consumed by the blanket of darkness about her; *without hunting the baloths I'd not know how to heal wounds, mine or others, and that would be the end of us both.*

He'd had to keep an eye on both his opponent and his supposed pack-mate as the fight wore on, gut instinct suspecting she'd drown them both in the filth she drew her mana from if she could. However like him she'd had little chance to land a telling blow on the frustrating man; Garruk alone had landed half a dozen strikes that would have felled a stout tree but had somehow been blocked by a copper or steel bottom and he walked out of blizzards of shadow or ghostly green fire with little more than a wistful comment about how things had been different when he was a young man. However when the rot-woman had snapped, calling out a curse on his ancestors and family Timothy had stopped, his look chilling even a hunter like the Wildspeaker,

"My children and theirs eh? Not the first time you've threatened them," his whisper had been deadly and Garruk had paused, not wanting to risk attacking prey that could become potentially enraged, "it's time you learned what happens when you make promises you can't keep!"

Fending off Garruk with a thrown brace of ladles (if nothing else this hunt had taught him the effectiveness of improvised weapons, especially if aimed at the soft bits) he had rushed past him towards the rot-woman, white mana blinding him and neutralising her potent shadow protections. When he recovered his sight he'd expected to see something akin to the last time she had fought with the man, her power choked off by his binding but what had actually occurred was far more worrying. All was obscured by a cloud of dirt, Timothy stalking out of it after a few seconds and nodding at him,

"Do yourself a favour young man; walk away and don't look back." The elder had then followed his own advice, stalking away as Garruk watched on, wary of striking such a dangerous prey in the back and then alerted by the sudden change behind him. As before the runes of the woman were bleeding but this time the mana was beyond her control; before his eyes she was ageing, the dark mana sucking the life from her and instinctively, as he would for any of his pack, he counteracted it with the vitality of the earth, a vitality he was then forced to focus on completely as the hungry nothingness devoured it. It seemed insatiable and all Garruk could do was feed it more; if he stopped now he didn't want to think about what else it could consume in lieu of mana. He'd called for aid when he had the breath though nothing had answered until he heard rushing behind him and glanced over his shoulder, relieved as he recognised those approaching,

"Stay back," he barked in warning, "don't go near her."

"What happened?"

"Don't know," he grunted, sensing them coming closer, "it was the old man; she eats mana now. If I stop it will eat all."

"Damn it, and I can't channel with these arms"; *explains the blood-smell* ; Garruk growled under his breath - knowing a problem didn't solve it, "it's those scribings; she's made dark pacts, at least two."

"Can you stop them?"

"Not without mana; Kiora what…?" Garruk heard quick, light footsteps and stilled his instinct to lash out as something came up on his blindside and squeezed under his arm. A voice talked hurriedly, its owner so small she could stand under his chest even as he knelt,

"What do I have to do?"

"Come back here!"

"It's the only way," the mergirl shouted back, resigning herself to a tongue-lashing later, "you need mana and he can heal you so you can get it - you can heal him right?"

"Yes"; *I hope* ;

"You've not channelled like this before."

"I'll learn fast; what do I have to do Garruk?"

"Feel the earth," glancing down he saw two small webbed hands between his own, "you have it?" Remembering all she could of Gideons' lectures of how to link with mana Kiora breathed in and out, centring herself, feeling a grip beyond her hands reach through the soil to the life within. Gideon had said every planeswalker had their own way to best pull the energy they needed; his was through reciting mental prayers and teachings, hence the excessively long lists he knew and had her write down when she misbehaved and hers, she hoped, was just to bull through. She reached, phantasmal fingers feeling something and seizing it, the weight making her buckle almost at once; she had used the strength of the forests before to help Gideon and her find their way across Zendikar but

never like this; *it's like he's pulling up a mountain! How strong is he?* ;

"It's, heavy," she gasped, closing her eyes to concentrate better, "give me, a minute, then help him."

His answer was a grunt as she focussed, feeling more and more of the weight transfer to her as Garruk slowly withdrew his hands from the ground. When he eventually let of the mana completely she held her breath, feeling like her shoulders were being pulled for their sockets as she dredged the power up, her last request a moaning hiss as she felt his earth-shaking footsteps leave,

"Hurry…"

Gideon had already ripped the bandages away with his teeth, holding both arms out to the beastmage as he looked to the source of the corruption, eyes narrowed; *no good comes from playing with the dark* . He could see runes of binding and evil promise, likely a pledge of her soul if not worse, but there was little to be done for it now; gods forbid they might need the necromancer and even if they didn't Kiora had put herself in danger from whatever was tearing her apart,

"She's brave."

"Not the word I'd use," Gideon grated, seeing the mergirls' tail swish; *she does that when she's afraid, or hurting - stupid, foolish girl!* He was so caught up watching over her he barely noticed Garruk probing the scratch on his left hand with the tip of his tongue,

"Poison"; the green mage spat into his palm, placing it over the cut and concentrating, his other hand wrapping around half Gideon's arm, the heiromancer not reacting save for the faintest twitch as his broken muscle was reknitted. His focus was on the small, shivering back before him; it was a race between Garruk and his apprentice and, as the levitated woman began to descend slowly, the streamers

of green mana bearing her aloft starting to thin, he feared it was a race they might lose.

It's so heavy, I can't - no, I can, I will ; but determination didn't stop the ache, the feeling like her back was breaking; *I mustn't let go, if I do… Gideon can't run fast enough. Just a second to rest then - no, no rest, if I drop it I'll never pick it up again and the lady might die. I can't let that happen* ; she forced herself to carry on but her grip over the mana was slipping, fatigue like sweat; *I won't give in - the Roil couldn't claim me and neither will this! It's another storm, another temple - this mana-mountain won't stop me, waves break mountains and I'm the wave of Zendikar, I…*

… I am the wave…

… Water, there's water in the earth or it'd be dust. Roll, flow, break the earth down - waves don't carry mountains, they build beaches from sand ; she took in a punctured gasp, seeing home in her minds' eye, the pitch and spray of the sea and how it shaped the fractious plane. Concentrating hard she imagined the moisture in the soil, clear water to swim through, to play in; *until it crashes, the wave will be, ever flowing, ever free.* The snippet of memory came unbidden, the old rhyme of her mothers' let her imagine the ocean, focus on it, *become* it; under her urging the mana of the trapped water span over and over against the mana of the earth, breaking it down and letting her carry it to the surface pinch by pinch. The weight had lessened but it was still so hard, so heavy her head throbbed and she felt sick but a wave in motion couldn't be stopped; she was a finder of the temple of Ula and not all the stupid soil in all the Multiverse was going to beat her.

To save someone she barely knew Kiora of Zendikar; cursed child; Roil-spawn; survivor; planeswalker; whirled through the mana of the earth and water, and found a way.

Since his ascension Gideon Jura had searched for a moment, a single fleeting instant to match that of his sparks' ignition; he had been looking for the wrong thing. Now, as the necromancer bobbed

gently on a tide of green and blue mana he knew at last why the man who had taught him had invested so much into preparing him for his gift; as his pupil reached beyond her limits Gideon's memories of his ignition were dimmed forever behind something else, an emotion much stronger. Garruk stepped back, throwing the ball of colourless goo his spell and spit had extracted from the dagger wound far into the distance and he stepped forwards, white mana flowing to him and the spell effortless in his mind.

Speaking clearly and intoning the runes without a pause the white mage stepped past his apprentice and faced the nihil without fear. Blazing with the strength of the plains he slashed the darkness with his whip, clearing a path to impress a small clay tablet on the woman's sternum, demanding her debts be held until later and by his command it was so. The hungry shroud shrank, new etchings scrawled on his tablet locking both her strength and her arrears in check, dissipating the lingering taint for now. After making sure the tablet wouldn't move he gingerly shifted the comatose woman off her blanket of mana, dried blood flaking from her now-unmarked skin as the tide receded. Looking away he glanced around at movement behind him, seeing Garruk approach guiding a much smaller, stumbling figure; Kiora seemed less than half-awake, barely noticing as he came forwards and thrust his burden out,

"Swap," he said stonily, a mite of command in his voice as Garruk regarded the witch with distaste. He eventually nodded, throwing her over a shoulder as Gideon fell to a knee, trembling arms encircling his neck as he pulled the mergirl close and lifted her off her feet,

"You," his voice cracked; he had to swallow and try again, "you are the most foolish, courageous and infuriating child I have ever met - you could have been torn in two! Why did you do that?"

"You'd have done it."

"I taught you too well," he breathed, skewered by his own code as he stood up, shifting Kioras' small weight enough to cradle her, "are you hurt?"

"My head, a bit," she murmured, curling up in his arms and holding the now-unmarked hand supporting her shoulder, his thumb caressing her cheek, "I'm tired but, we did it?"

"We did, you did; I have never been prouder of anything, or anyone, in my life than I am now." She looked away shyly as a shadow fell over them; Garruk with his passenger held in place by his axe. He regarded them both and smiled, reaching for his wrist and removing one of the charms hanging from it; safe, drowsy and with Gideon's steady heartbeat against her ear Kiora didn't move as the huge man placed it over her head, the little tooth on its thong fitting like a necklace,

"Grow strong small-claw," the Wildspeaker purred respectfully, "I, you and your father will hunt great prey one day." Gideon felt warm ice slosh down his backbone,

"She's, uh, we're…"

Whatever he wanted to say was lost as his burden shifted, Kiora revolved into him and he felt her shake, small hands grip his jerkin hard - he held her closer but dared not look down; if he did he would break and they couldn't afford that. Garruk's look could have filled a library and the hieromancer nodded, just once, before the Wildspeaker stiffened, looking over his head. Dropping behind the beastmage to keep Kiora out of danger Gideon saw his ally snatch something from the air, eyes widened as he caught a scent from it,

"One of the tall ones from the sky," he ripped it opened and scanned it, "a map - this way." Gideon knew better than to doubt the wild mage; out of all casters they were least likely to deceive; so pausing only to make sure he was holding the child; *my child, blood be damned* ; safely he took off on Garruks' heels with Kiora in his arms recovering, a true wave no longer.

A wave was free until it crashed and, though neither of them had known it until now, the Wave of Zendikar had crashed upon Gideon Jura a long time ago.

Damn it, damn it, damn it - why am I always helpless? ; he could feel the insidious spell knotted around his soul and body, cutting him off from the aether and making more than breathing impossible; *why am I always watching others fight?*

Logically he should be grateful Chandra was protecting him; emotionally it was worse than death. The psychotic Rakdos was lobbing bombs by the handful, Chandra's flames blowing them up in the air but the damned blood-witch seemed to have an endless supply. He wanted so desperately to tell her to run, leave him alone but he dared not upset her concentration, forced to watch her dance along a knife-edge; one mistake could be her last and that Jace couldn't countenance. Smoke was venting from her back and gloves as she kept pace with her mad opponent but if this pace kept up she'd either overheat or snuff out entirely and it would be over. Cursing himself the mind-mage tried to dislodge the ribbon of strange mana that bound him by force of will alone but it remained, cold, unyielding and inevitable as death, his only comfort a vow sworn as he watched the fire mage fight; Chandra had sworn she would make the Rakdos a memory if he was hurt - if the mad guilds' witch harmed her he would erase even that.

"You're warming up little sparkler," Exava crooned, tossing two explosives at once that her opponent met with twin spits of flame, "you'll see the living paper alight."

"Go to hell!"

"Been there, got bored, came back; Rakdos owed me a favour," she ran her tongue along her teeth, bloodying it as she prepared more explosives, "these should be fun for you. They explode into fir-hmm." She fell silent before leaping upwards, dropping the explosive into the jaws that opened beneath her and landing behind as the earth belched smoke, face a mask of fury,

"Who stopped my game, it was you wasn't it?" Jace couldn't see who she was addressing and took his chance, gritting his teeth against

the flames of Chandras' mind as he exerted the only influence he could,

" *Your armour's glowing - you need to cool down* ."

" *Get out my head* ."

" *No, you can't take her as you are.* "

" *And we can't let her go* - damn it Exava leave her alone - I'm the one you want!" Chandra made to follow the screeching witch as she ran away but then stopped; Jace saw her looking back at him and shamed curdled his stomach as he realised why; *I can't defend myself. I'm pathetic* ; he couldn't even look away to hide his shame as her shins came closer, the firebrand looking all around to keep an eye out for danger. Misery roiling in his belly Jace was too busy castigating himself for neglecting his practise, something Chandra had warned him about so often, to hear the firebrand speak until she prodded him with her toe,

"What did she do to you?" It took him a second to focus, the red mages' mind still smouldering with concern as she watched something he couldn't see,

" *I don't know, not felt anything like it. Who called the bitch off?*

"The elf, Revane; she's making the floor stand up; get her, get, damn it she blew it up - get out of here you dumb knife-ear! She's going for the woods, I'll set them on, no," he would have jumped at her shout had he been able to, "Jace wait here!"

Take your time ; the sour thought did little to distract him from his worry as Chandra's boots pounded away, clouds of dust flying behind her as she chased her foe. Suddenly she slewed to a halt and his breath hitched, fearing the worst,

"I don't… Vraska I'd kiss you if you weren't venomous!" Relief flooded through him at Chandra's cheering, though as she shouted

praise after the friend he couldn't see she was too excited to hear him until he was all but telepathically yelling in her ear,

" *What happened?* "

"Vraska," the pyromaster declared breathlessly, running back to him and gabbling quickly, "she was a tree; well, pretending to be one. The elf fell over, Exava dived for her and the tree moved, grabbed her and as soon as she looked bang, got the bitch! Free cuddles on me next time we're plane-hunting!" Jace sagged in relief; *one of them fallen and none of ours I know of hurt - that's a blessing but at what cost?* ;

" *Chandra, Chandra*," the tone of his mental voice stymied her celebrations somewhat, " *if she has problems with, what she's done tell her to see me, no matter what I'm doing.* "

"What do you… oh," the offer quieted her grandstanding - as far as she knew Vraska had never used her deadly glare before, "I see what you mean Jace. Best do that now if we can, they're coming this way - hopefully Revane can undo whatever that bit… no, look out! Where is she, where the hell did they go?!"

" *Who?* "

"Revane was about to stick Exava and something exploded; not a bomb, just water I think. I saw someone, I'm sure of it, she grabbed the Rakdos and pulled her under - damn it we had her!"

" *We still do unless they can undo Vraska's stare quickly and even if they can we know what she can do now, even she can't carry too many more explosives surely. Uh, Chandra?"*

"Yeah?"

" *Could you roll me over; there's a really sharp stone right under my chin. Yes, hilarious*," judging by the chortling she certainly thought it was, " *please, and thank you* ."

"For what, never said I'd do it; don't count your dragons and all that Jace."

" *Not for that*," he sighed, mental voice softening, " *for saving me* ."

Her laughter died away and the mind-mage heard her come closer, felt a hand at his shoulder, then he was facing up, the light overhead partially blocked by the curtain of scarlet hair spiralling towards him as Chandra stared down, serious despite being smudged with soot,

"You'd have done the same," she stated with complete certainty, kneeling as his side while still keeping an eye out for danger, "so Liliana, Emmara, Auriea, Lavinia and now the Rakdos cultist; any other women I should know about throwing themselves at you? I can stay in a tavern if you need some private nights you know, it'll be very discreet." Sadly for the memory adept Exava's foul binding didn't extend to his blush response, Chandra snickering as with the danger gone and her mail plinking as it cooled down she had a little fun with her housemate while keeping an eye open,

"Oh come on, you must have known you'd get popular when you became the Guildpact; most powerful man in Ravnica, what girl wouldn't want you? Brings a whole new meaning to the phrase hammered by the law doesn't it?"

" *Don't joke about Auriea, it was hard for her to admit that crush. I was sorry to see her go to the Selesnya but it was better for all concerned.* "

"Yeah, fewer youngsters to hear the law being laid down."

" *This isn't fair, you're picking on a helpless man - I can't even cover my ears* ."

"Pretty sure it's not your ears they want to cover," she pointed out, Jace turning steadily more maroon as she refused to show mercy, "and just think, we can get hold of that von-whoever-he-was and get

the sequel put away in record time. Your very own denouement series Jace, you'd be so proud."

" *Don't forget who my first co-star was!* "

"Eh, I'm not famous."

" *Yet - I can make it happen Chandra; I am the Guildpact after all. Hey, quit that; I was joking* ."

"So am I," the fire mage said, tapping his forehead persistently as he glared up at her,

" *That's really irritating* ."

"Thought it might be."

" *You're not going to stop are you?* "

"Wasn't planning on it."

" *As soon as I get my body and mana back and we're out of this mess I'm going to, to do something you'll regret!"*

"Ohh, scary," she told him, prodding the tip of his nose instead, "tell me more Guildpact; what are your plans?"

" *Getting more ominous with every tap*," he promised darkly, relieved as she finally ceased and stood up, waving to someone he couldn't see,

"Hi Vraska, Revane, thanks for that; Exava's a real bitch. Wow, what happened to you, I thought you were walking funny."

"Just call me Nissa"; *oh that's not fair* ; remembering the hoops he'd had to jump through to find out the shaman's name Jace could only fume as she gave it away freely, "our opponent was skilled hand-to-hand. What happened to Beleren?"

"Well he's a bit shy, doesn't get out the library much… she flashed him, fatal"; *that's it - spiders, lots and lots of spiders* ; "can either of you break this sort of magic; I might crisp him by mistake."

"I can," Jace heard Vraskas' husking tone and the chafing of her scales, then felt a sudden spike of fear, "even mana rots."

By the time he thought his concern it was too late; a horrible fusion and green and black mana, life and death landed on his chest, sinking through his flesh like treacle. His only saving grace was that he couldn't cringe and accidentally offend the gorgon as her spell ate through the mana binding him; he could feel it loosen until with a rush it broke, Jace sitting up and half-coughing, half-belching out the residue,

"Urgh, that was worse than her tossed salad."

"You promised you'd never mention that!"

"No, I promised I'd never mention what you put in it," he clarified at Chandra's betrayed horror, recalling with a shudder the time she'd tried to surprise him and not realised what he'd hung around the kitchen to dry weren't vegetables but a selection of somewhat esoteric potion ingredients; *still it was a surprise for the plumbing* ; "are you both all, oh," he cut off as he saw Nissa's face, "whoever did this will suffer for their slight against…"

"No," the elf held up a hand, grateful to have her spear back in it after leaving it with Vraska to make her fleeing-deer act a more alluring bait, "there's no honour here; we're all equal in this."

"Too right, equally hunted," Chandra bit in, "who was the girl who rescued Exava, one of them?"

"Her name is Melanie Vynsacher; she is a brawler but skilled with blue and green mana, she escaped us using the technique you just saw," Vraska explained, shooting Nissa a sidelong glance. The elf was confused for an instant then understood, another reason to be

grateful to the gorgon as Jace stood up, his mind on the problem facing them,

"So her, Exava and that Timothy von Pomperduke; three casters, two of whom we've seen can use translocomotion magic. Not good news, there should be six of them in total if one wrote each book."

"Against thirteen of us; odds should be in our favour but," that word was all-important as the pyromancer scowled, "we're scattered and they know some of our spells. I would have turned the blood-witch to charcoal but she was immune to fire somehow, and how did she learn to cast mana, least of all from the plains."

"What?"

"You didn't know," Jace's horrified expression convinced her he didn't, "there was definitely a tinge of white in what you just got rid of, she shouldn't be able to weave that."

"No, it takes calm to hold it and she doesn't have any," despite having only been chased by the shrieking woman for a minute or so Nissa was confident that was true, "we need to find the others. Whoever these people are they've split us up for a reason."

"So let's undo that reason," Chandra declared, thinking and glad to have had a chance to cool down; but for their intervention she might well have been in serious trouble, "I know a few spells for finding things but they're not so good for people." Nissa smiled,

"Tracking is what I do; let me gather my mana."

"No need," the fourth member of their group cut in, Vraska having been facing away from them, "I have a map."

As she unfolded the small bird of paper the rest were already there, poring over it as Jace asked,

"Where did it come from?"

"It flew here on its own, from that way." Jace sagged in relief,

"Good, it must be from a blue mage; leave this to me, I should be able to see the mana stream and talk to them, find out what's going on."

"We can read upside-down," Nissa assured him and he sat back, sinking into a trance as he called on his mostly-untouched mana to see beyond the paper, back through the spell that had sent this small bird to the brush that had penned the small map, to the hand that had held the brush and the mind behind the hand, calmer and more patient than any humans but a mind nevertheless…

Tamiyo twitched, a movement so small none but a soratami would have seen it; *that was strange, I thought I heard…* ;

" *Hello*," her eyes widened, " *are you the map-maker?* "

"Who are you?"

" *Keep speaking, I hear your words through your own ears. My name is Jace Beleren from the council called by Liliana Vess - we have your map, it was sent to us as a flying bird. You use blue mana and drew the flight enchantment in an invisible mark on the bottom left corner of the parchment."* Staying behind cover the Moon Sage let out a low breath - only one as adept as her with the strength of the sea would have been able to tell so much about her spell from a glance,

"I am Tamiyo; how many are you?"

"Tamiyo-san"; she quickly waved her fellow moonfolk quiet in time to hear his tenuous response,

" *Four and we can all fight; our enemies have fled.* "

"We have a strong enemy coming, a blade master; he has already defeated his quarry. We are preparing to ambush him but another foe escaped, an assassin. Wait," her eyes widened, a thought occurring to her as she realised how he must have been communicating with her, "you are skilled with the mind?"

" *Yes, why?"*

"Focus your mana, as much as you can; Venser-san, Venser," the man stood over his injured friend, though reluctant to abandon his post, eventually came over at her insistence, "channel your mana. Jace-san, my friend will follow the thread connecting us, another here needs your aid."

"Tamiyo-san what…?" She quickly cut Venser off, holding her hand towards his glowing one,

"Do not argue, there is no time," she could feel the very thin thread connecting them to this hope fading with every heartbeat; her palm was small compared to the artificers but she channelled the contact to her friend, speaking as she did, "this voice belongs to Jace Beleren. We have to find him; he may be able to help Elspeth-san." The name of the broken knight focussed his mind sharply,

"He'll be found," he quickly sent his mana through the thread, tracking it to its source and nodding, "tell him to stand back, this is going to be loud." Tamiyo nodded, whispering to herself and closing her eyes as with a rumbling crack and a pulse of brightness he was gone.

Fortunately Jace managed to pass the message on just in time and the artificer arrived to find a spear poking him in the belly rather than spearing through it. Slowing down his palpitating heart he nodded at the elf who'd almost disembowelled him as the redheaded woman appraising him whistled lowly,

"Neat trick."

"Thanks - Jace Beleren I assume?"

"Yes," the Ravnican said shortly, recovering from the long-range telepathic conversation, "what's happening; your friend said someone was injured."

"She is, in her mind and the one who harmed her is closing in on us. He's powerful and he knows things, and the nezumi bastard's likely still after us too."

"Nezumi?"

"Half-rat, half-man and a lot more dangerous than he looks, keep your eyes on the shadows," Venser said warningly, satisfying Vraskas' curiosity as he gathered himself again; *one more jump will likely be my limit - I have to make it count for Elspeths' sake!* ; " sorry but we need you now Jace, my friend is suffering."

"Take me as well," Chandra said suddenly, "can you do that?" Venser did some calculations and nodded, bracing himself,

"It'll be all I can do but yes." The pyromaster nodded, looking at the map again,

"Vras, Nissa find the other groups; shouldn't be too hard, Gideon's got feet like an elephant. The more of us there are together the less chance they'll have to pick us off." Nissa was already concentrating, the grass about her feet swaying as the gorgon nodded for them both,

"We'll see it done; be careful Chandra, Jace."

"I'm always careful," the firebrand said jokingly, though she met the symbiote her friend offered forwards with her cheek, a sincere farewell amongst Vraska's kind, "look after yourselves, we will get through this."

"We will," the gorgon echoed, looking away as the shaman's eyes opened and she indicated a direction with her spear,

"That way, though they're running into trouble."

"That'd be Jura all right - ready ah, Vensar?"

"Yes, sorry if this jolts."

They vanished in a clap of thunder, the light of the teleportation illuminating the other two running towards the rest of the scattered planeswalkers, ready to lend spear and gaze to whatever battles lay ahead.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 - Body, Mind and Soul.

Ploughing over the rough terrain, his burden so slight it was inconsequential Garruk plotted the course their enemies were likely to take given what he'd seen on the small map now crumpled between his fingers. Their hunters had tried to split them apart and drag them down, fearing their potential strength as a pack but that plan, he hoped, had failed. He and the white mage in his wake were likely a match for any who came across them and the cub was surprisingly resourceful as well, certainly more use than the dead-weight he had slung over one shoulder. He'd not hunted with another human for many moons but as the wind brought whispers of other voices nearby, including one he recognised as an enemy, he realised that was likely to change,

"They are ahead," he growled lowly, slowing from his run and hearing the heiromancer do the same, "one destroyed the rot-woman, the other I don't know."

"Can we go around them?"

"They are in our path, the ground here is too flat to hide without going a long way around."

"And cutting through won't happen," Gideon muttered before another voice piped up softly,

"We can take them; if nothing else it's two on two," Kiora wriggled, squirming free of Gid… of *her fathers'* grip even though she was loathe to leave his arms; *Ula can keep her treasure. I don't care if he can't swim - I'll live in a desert if he wants to* ; "while we keep them here they're not hurting the others."

"What about this one?"

"I'll look after her," Kiora offered, pulling something from her belt that made Gideon inhale sharply,

"That's Jhon'ees dagger."

"She didn't need it, and I scrubbed off the poison with sand. And you can't say anything," she reminded him, managing a smile as she tried to hide her headache, "you weren't above stealing when you were younger." Gideon opened his mouth to argue, then closed it when he realised he couldn't,

"I trust small-claw," Garruk settled the argument, speaking quietly as he edged towards the conversation he could hear snatches of, "stay low."

Gideon did his best to follow these instructions but was left behind by the green mage, the Wildspeaker seemed to merge with the land itself as he crept forwards, though as the wind shifted it blew words towards them that even Kiora, now creeping beside him, could catch,

..".supposed to be that colour?"

"Not her face, though given the narcotics she goes through I shudder to think what her liver looks like." The rucksack facing them was unmistakeable, the pans all around it, fewer than there had been at least, clinking musically as its owner bent down over something they couldn't see,

"Well, what do we do; we've got company." *Blue mage* ; Garruk saw the iridescent shimmer from somewhere behind the old man and stood up, his full height imposing and, maybe, enough to make the stranger back down,

"You stand back and give me room," Tim was talking again and at his voice the stranger stepped out from behind him, a young woman, probably from Ravnica as she was dressed similar to Jace Beleren, watching whatever her friend was stooped over warily, "I'm going to do…"

"Don't say science!"

"I was going to say the kiss of life, though it might be the death of me if she wakes up."

"Good; it's okay," the girl hailed them loudly, "your eyebrows are safe."

Timothy's response to this was unintelligible but doubtlessly offensive as suddenly his backpack bobbed and he then leapt over something prone on the ground, something that suddenly sat upright with a great gasp. *Three on two then, and we've injured to look after* ; unhooking his sural Gideon took a step forwards, whispering to Garruk,

"Drop her, carefully; don't break or move the tablet," the life mage did so, lowering his burden to the ground and Gideon was faintly relieved to see her shifting slightly in her sleep; *so whatever she's bound to hasn't claimed her life at least* ; "Kiora make sure that binding doesn't come loose and wrap both of you up if they break through."

"Got it; go get them, pa," Gideon's gut flip-flopped and somehow looking over his shoulder was one of the hardest things he'd ever done but he managed, giving his new daughter a smile as he stepped forwards, his sural whipping as the Wildspeaker unlimbered his axe, both mages stepping away from each other to give themselves room to swing as their last opponent sprang to her feet,

"Who was that?" Even at a distance the insanity of her voice was tangible, "Who dared…?"

"It was him," the accusation made her whip around so quickly Gideon missed it, though he didn't miss the depravity evident in the scarred face or engorged pupils that raked over him like a rusty nail. That gaze paused, however, as she took in the figure her friend had indicated and the woman cocked her head, seemingly lost in conversation with herself,

"What a man; so much bigger than the skinny Guildpact - yes, my man if he lives."

She let out a noise halfway between a cackle and a battle-scream and charged towards them, something bright glinting in her free hand as Garruk met her with a roar of his own, green mana flaring around him as he stampeded to meet her. Gideon stayed where he was, adopting a defensive stance as the remaining two enemies approached, giving the ensuing brawl between the life mage and the death cultist a respectable berth. Channelling his mana and making the whip blaze white he awaited them, though the ritual they went through before battle was one alien to him, and when the elder of the two tapped the two outstretched fingers of his contemporary with his fist he was left mystified,

"Sorry young Mel, old age and treachery and all that," he said breezily, spinning his skillets around, "looks like I'll be your opponent young man and don't worry," he pointed behind him, the woman giving a wave as she watched on, "she won't harm the little one. Jhon'ee told us about the pair of you, a good thing you did back there, reminds me of my younger days; still," white mana was called to counter white mana, Gideon preparing himself and speaking his battle prayers as Timothy tipped his hat, "let's see this done."

They're attuned to fire as well - good ; he sensed the stranger through the improvements he'd made to this ambush site, preparing for the arrival of the faint outline on the horizon and swearing it would be different this time; *we'll cook that bastard in his armour* ;

"Who're we up against and what's the plan?"

"A knight, don't let him get close," the Vulshok said shortly, the sight of his enemy making his blood boil out of both rage and, thought he wouldn't admit it, fear as well, "his scythe reaches further than you'd think and cuts metal like cloth. You're a pyromancer?"

"Yeah," Chandra confirmed, lifting her goggles to get a good look at the silhouette she'd be reducing to slag, "you're Koth right? Lavamancer?"

"Geomancer mostly, and Kaguya," the pyromancer double-took; until indicated by the Vulshoks' metal hands she hadn't noticed the thin, willowy figure scattering dust from her palms and plaiting mist with her fingers, "she works with plants and earth. We'll hold him here, we have to hold him." Chandra nodded, summoning her flames,

"We will; Jace is helping your friend, he's good with the mind," she reassured him, smiling a little at the understatement, "ours is someone who's tried to kill us in the past; dare I ask how you know this guy?" The Vulshok snorted, cracks in his armour glowing dully as he held his rage in check; he was still too far away to hit yet, his tread as slow as the years but inevitable as death,

"It's to do with my fleck, my daughter," he explained at the womans' confusion, though he wasn't giving away the whole truth to strangers, "he knows of her and he thinks I, Elspeth and I were unworthy - I think he may take her if we fall here."

"He will fail," Kaguya's melodious voice had a hard edge, "I have had children," and regardless of their father she had watched them grow, felt them kick and the need to find somewhere safe for them had driven her to carry on during her lowest ebbs, "and I will suffer none who would threaten them."

"Me neither," Chandra's voice was cold, a burning gaze fixed on the advancing enemy as details became clearer, "tell me where you want my firepower Koth, emphasis on fire." He looked between them, gratitude set in his face before he punched his fists together softly, the bang both a thanks to allies and a challenge to enemies,

"Thank you; now let's bury this bastard deep!"

He was close enough to see clearly now and despite herself Chandra felt a small shiver ripple through her at the sight. It wasn't

just his height, or the heavy armour he wore and its adornment of terrible spikes along the gauntlets, pauldrons and armguards, nor the collection of blades he carried at his back, all sheathed and cast into shadow by the two-handed scythe he held. Even the inhuman coldness and zeal of the eyes above his cloth veil wasn't an insurmountable problem though it wasn't comfortable to look at. However all those things in combination gave a terrible profile none wanted to linger on too long; therefore when Koth slammed his metal fists into the ground and the earth before them erupted into noise, fire and ash that smothered him, the pyromancer was more grateful than she let on that he was out of their sight and caught by the Vulshoks' trap.

She didn't dim her flames though, just in case

Having been swiftly introduced to the soratami who'd guided them here and now hovered above both himself and the exhausted Venser, the artificers' strength dwindled by use of his unique powers, Jace gathered himself. He had done healing of this nature before, usually for an exorbitant fee or members of his staff coping with unexpected loss but healing a damaged mind was best done in a calm, relaxed environment with a minimum of outside distractions to ensure a sense of peace. He suspected such peace would be very difficult achieve in the middle of a warzone given an explosion like the end of everything had just gone off but what the hell - he'd make do.

The unconscious woman now half-reclined on his knees had a strong, angular face that was likely usually winsome, perhaps even pretty despite the lines worry and time had carved into it. Her hair was short and tawny, her build athletic and though he didn't recognise the engravings he recognised her garb as that of a well-trained warrior. He knew her name was Elspeth and she was knight of some kind and that was all he knew; *for now* ; blocking out the clamour of battle as best he could he prepared himself; *much as I'd*

wish for better circumstance, it's time we got to know each other better .

With this thought foremost Jace exhaled slowly, his hand on the womans' cool brow as he exerted his influence as carefully as he could, looking for a touch on her traumatised mind, something he could centre himself on and use…

… to count the time; how long had it been now; how many hours?

The drip of water was a rasp in her head but it was gentler, far gentler than what the monsters did. Like the others she was silent - screaming and crying only brought attention from their mad jailors and so silence was the best hope for survival. Huddled in her rags she crouched in the cold and the slime, hearing the mocking, maddening drip of the water running freely outside.

How long now; how many hours before they came again?

She had to keep recounting, losing her place constantly as one of the others chained with her in this bleak existence moaned or sobbed in their pain or nightmares and were hastily shushed by the others. She caught her breath, a reflex action as she'd long ago learned hope was a torture worse than anything the fiends could do. The dripping water was ignored, now she counted the steps behind the portal, the claw upon the handle, the rattle and clank of rusted metal squealing open to reveal the horror behind, a twisted, fused nightmare of machine and flesh. It looked, as much as it could look, around the room and in multi-faceted eyes she saw her face reflected a hundred times. She should have stayed still, it didn't matter if she moved or not; the monster would always find her but she moved regardless, her useless, weak heart still fluttering at the hope of a way out of this undying nightmare, away from the diseased thing that stalked towards her, its chosen relief from the madness. The chain bit into her ankle but she strained still, pulling as the need somehow rose, grew stronger as it never had before; it was swelling, filling every crevice of her broken, beaten being, so powerful it consumed her into a single embodiment, an ultimate primal want…

… escape.

It faded almost as soon as it had begun and she realised she had escaped; hope rose as she rolled over and saw sunlight, true light above her for the first time before the memories arose and she quickly crushed that hope before it could cripple her as others had before.

Death and horror would ever be close behind her; there was no escape from the monster in the doorway…

Like a diver gone too deep Jace gasped as he surfaced from the foreign memories that had pulled him under; *I didn't, I never - what happened to you?* ; the mind-mage caught his breath, fighting with everything he had to stay in control. Her mind was in turmoil and she was trapped within it, reliving her nightmares over and over, a helpless cycle he'd wish on no-one if the memory of her sparks' ignition was anything to go by. The memory was so raw he felt phantom pain on his ankle, the lingering visage of her torturer one that would likely haunt his nightmares, and she was reliving it as he wasted time! Hastily regathering his composure and steeling himself the Ravnican took another breath and let himself go again…

… and again, and again until the stance was flawless. Her blade-work was the most advanced in her class but she couldn't stop, she daren't give in to fatigue or pain until her technique was perfect…

… she had her sword, her cloak and her sigil; after the celebratory feast of her knighthood she slept peacefully, the monster locked away…

… "Hello Aran, I am Elspeth; I will be your mentor under the code."

"My lady, I am honoured…"

… Unsettled dreams, a nameless scratching at the back of her mind; the sigils became heavier, her less able to bear their purity as she had lost her own a long time ago…

… blood and horror, a den of devils; she cut them down, coated in their foul blood but knowing it was futile - the monster had found her at last…

… Angels were cast down, the walls were breached and Aran lay dead at her feet, her hands stained crimson - all was lost, all would ever be lost, then there was fire, white fire and all the darkness was gone…

… Honour and duty, she could bear them no longer; she saw their eyes, their hope and was unworthy of it. This was not a place for one like her, it had never been, but she would never have another home like Bant…

… The fighting, the cheering of drunken crowds, the hated mark, an old friend and her arms and armour gifted back to her…

… The Tomb of Flesh, the light within showed the dead consumed, the monster clawing after her - she ran, knowing it was ever close behind…

… The metal dead, covered in ichors; her strength failed, she could go no further…

… The simple fool, no idea what was coming, what her world would become now the monsters had a foothold in it. The deserters' eye was the least of her burdens but others were suffering - rather doom fall on her head than theirs…

… fury, fighting, death, death, death - revenge against the monsters but revenge for nothing, there was no victory here…

… Melira, the fleshling, the one light in the darkness, a light she had once had and would now protect…

… The oil retreating, the sun upon Ish-Sar - Tiszta, the metal-one, sister of Melira and the light of Mirrodin…

..Rebuilding the shattered plane; Koth's melding with Nurthu, Venser leaving to continue his wanderings - peace, tranquillity but ever the faint lingering threat, the last warning of the knight in the mist driving her to train, to prepare, to heed the monster snapping at her heels again…

Withdrawing quickly Jace had to steady himself, such wretched pity overwhelming him he had to fight down the desire to erase every one of the nightmares plaguing her; there had been a time he would have done just that but, older and wiser now, he knew denying the past never solved it. The skeletons still rattled no matter how many closets they were buried in but Elspeth had so many, had held them off so long and he hadn't even reached the tipping point, the last straw that had broken her. Forcing his hand steady the mind-mage returned, almost at the end of this terrible journey and prayed he'd stay together until…

… the end; she cared little if she made it out or not but Koth would, he had a family to return to!

Her blade sang, her stances flawless but her opponent was her match, his unusual weapon twisting and spinning as sparks flew from their collisions. He channelled no mana; maybe he couldn't; and so neither did she, her heart the only place the codes of war of lost Bant still lingered - Koth also didn't interfere out of respect for her duel but she knew from long experience she knew he'd be setting something up if she fell. Despite death looming close she was glad - on the edge was one of the few places she felt comfortable, the past forgotten in favour of the present,

"You fight well," she didn't react to the cold voice, her battle-mask unbroken as she forced the blade of the scythe away and tried to step around the haft, though he mimicked her turn and knocked her backslash away, "but why do you fight?" Still she didn't respond, pressing her advantage and careful not to slip in the loose sand, knowing it was going to be hell to remove from her armour later and wanting to put this opponent down before fatigue became an enemy. Suddenly he stepped backwards, scythe spinning into a guard and

she mirrored him, both taking stock after taking their opponents' measure,

"I sense your heart through your blade," the stranger spoke again, his tone unchanging, "it is made of gold, glass and steel - strong, but it can break."

"It's enough to pierce your black one," she retorted, sword spinning in her grip, "who are you and why do you haunt us here?"

"A dream was passed to you and to Mirrodin, a world that suffered to see it made as many have before. I will see that dream protected." There was a flash of steel and fire before her, Koth landing squarely between them with his ire raised; she had to step back from the furnace of his rage as his battle-gauntlets grew from his hands,

"You will not touch her - Tiszta is my fleck, my blood as though born to me," the Vulshok demanded, though their opponent remained unmoved as he scrutinised the new challenger,

"Tiszta; a fitting name - tell me Koth of the Hammer, would you love her even if I tell you truth of her?" Koth's back was lost behind a heat-haze, Elspeth sweating in her armour at his rage,

"There are no words or wounds that would take her from me madman; she is my life, the light of my plane, the hope given after what those bastard machines took from us." The answering laugh set the knights' teeth on edge,

"You say she is the light of Mirrodin, the embodiment of the Vulshok legends, one who transcends flesh and mimics the creator of your plane. You are both so blind, so unseeing of what is before you - have you not sensed it, have neither of you truly felt within her soul to see what lies there?"

A terrible cold clawed into her, the pain so sudden she gasped, her blade trembling; machines did not, they could not…

"No," she barely heard Koth's denial, whispers rising as she shook her head to dash them away but the colourless voice came again, and she wished it had been his scythe instead,

"Yes, she is marked as you both are, the perfect machine. Your fleck has two fathers Koth of the Hammer, you and another far older than Mirrodin who was watching when his children ascended to fulfil his vision," her hands slipped, her sword falling into the sand as the last dread truth was revealed, "and when she steps beyond your world for the first time, when the last Phyrexian planeswalks, Yawgmoth's dream will be finally realised and from beyond the veil, he will smile."

She remembered falling vaguely, the sand cushioning her landing as her heart of glass and gold shattered and the monster roared in triumph, the perfect predator striking behind the face of a tiny girl. The sounds of battle echoed as though from miles away, the yells of pain not piercing her fugue and even the impact over her stomach some time later not reaching her over the sound of dripping water, the squeal of a gate opening and her face reflected in many crystal eyes…

… how long had it been - how many hours?

He was crying and he was unashamed, reaching down to hold the comatose woman awkwardly even if he knew she couldn't feel it, she couldn't feel anything beyond her own pain. He bit his lip, forcing himself to focus on something other than the misery, disentangling her visceral experiences from his own mind as he breathed raggedly, trying to decide how or even if he could help. Elspeths' mind was open, the words of the cruel knight had shattered all her mental defences; with but a touch he could erase the experiences and he snatched his hand away to stop himself doing just that. Holding his breath he sought comfort in his mana and applied himself to the problem, thrusting his emotions to the side until it was safe to release them - right now Elspeth needed a way to face down these demons in her head, not him going to pieces because he couldn't countenance surviving even part of what he'd seen her live through.

Sculpting her mind was out as was wrenching her straight back to consciousness; breaking from trauma so quickly would likely cause serious damage to her psyche even he would be hard-pressed to put right. He thought for a moment before, as had become almost commonplace, he remembered looking through the eyes of someone else, someone who had shown him so much he would never be able to truly thank her for it, and he saw an end to this cycle of despair. Chandra might have often teased him for writing her denouements but now more than ever he was grateful for the practise; he couldn't end the nightmare for this woman but he could frame its ending.

On a battlefield and with war raging all about him Jace Beleren let go a breath, placed his hand on the brow of a suffering stranger and began to craft his opus.

They'd thrown little short of a mountain at him, and damned if Koth hadn't come close to hurling one of them too, and he still wouldn't fall.

The Vulshok's trap had half-worked, it had sent their enemy reeling even if he appeared unharmed by the explosions and the torrent of flame Chandra had scorched him with as he regained his footing. By a combination of the uneven ground, the continual barrage of fire and rock the two red mages were throwing at him and the impediment of the plants coaxed into life by Kaguya's urging they were keeping him at bay, something Chandra had to say as she tapped into the red mana the Hammer tribe leader had pulled towards the surface before this battle had begun,

"What the hell is this guy made of? He's like Exava, our enemy," she broke off to send a plume of fire towards the figures' knee, though the spinning scythe deflected it towards one of the semi-human plants pulling itself out of the earth to surround him, setting it merrily ablaze, "she seemed immune to flame as well." Punching the earth and snarling triumphantly as the shaking ground forced their enemy to a knee Koth ripped free a handful of mud, imbuing it with enough mana to turn it hard as basalt before hurling it, the missile smashing

into the armoured figures' arm and half-spinning him as he called back,

"Even if he is keep lighting him up, we heat his armour up enough he'll not be able to breathe properly. Seen it happen before to…" a flash of pain crossed his face and he renewed the assault with a vengeance, remembering his injured friend, ..".just die you rust-stain, my fleck will never be yours or your bastard gods!"

"Too right; Kaguya how are you doing?"

"Well enough," the soratami replied, her eyes no longer standing out as streamers of blue, white and black mana sank into the earth, nurturing the pips she'd sown there, "I will need to replace those seeds I have lost but it is a worthy sacrifice."

"Got that right; you pin him, we'll cook him."

"I like my meat well-done," the firebrand had to double-take to realise the strange planeswalker was making a joke, then she laughed and a thorny tendril wrapped around their enemy's scythe handle burst into fire, licking towards his face before he wrenched it away. Seeing Koth launch another barrage Chandra took a slight gamble, breaking off her pyromantic assault to form something a little more precise, her phoenix screaming into being some seconds later. It circled overhead, waiting for a moment to strike as their enemy, battered but somehow still standing, finally recovered his full balance and stood tall, facing down the fire, avalanches and greenery set against him without fear as he span his scythe vertically, the blade facing them,

"Enough."

The voice cut Chandra's ears like a razor but worse was the, the pulse; she could think of no other word for it; that followed the butt of his pole arm striking the ground. Something invisible, something intangible rippled from him and brought desolation in its wake; her phoenix was snuffed out, the lashing vines Kaguya controlled like a puppet master withered to nothingness and even Koth's hurled rock

disintegrated to grey dust, falling to the earth as they braced themselves as best they could. It was like being doused in ice and darkness together, a invasive, creeping cold that snatched away both breath and hope; gasping and shivering Chandra saw their opponent marching towards them like an aspect of the reaper and reached for a spell only to find dread awaiting her,

"He's poisoned the mana somehow; can anyone…?"

"No, not enough," Koth confirmed, looking both grave and at their opponent with undisguised loathing as he beckoned both the other planeswalkers closer, "Chandra listen, when I say now I need you to pour everything you've got into me. Don't argue," his tone was one of command and she cut off her protestations with a snap, "I can handle the heat and we've only got one shot. Kaguya have you anything left in the soil?" The veins at the sides of her eyes bulged for a second, something that still made Chandra feel queasy, and she shook her head,

"No, everything is gone but," a hint of emerald flicked across her seemingly-sightless eyes, "I kept something back."

"Good, when I move use it to throw off his aim; trip him, throw dust in his eyes just get me set up for a clear blow." Orange met white and both nodded, Koth smiling slightly before standing to his full height and clashing his arms together, the ache from his friends' repairs already gone; *good old Venser, he always does the best work* ;

"You set foot on my world," the Vulshok roared, starting to glow as he pumped the life-blood of the mountains through himself, "you injure my friends and you besmirch my family - you will pay *my* price! What's your name, man I will bury here?"

"I've never given it to anyone," the dead voice assured him, the scythe spinning lazily about its wielder as he marched forth implacably, "one of those I am forced to work with refers to me as Spikes." Koth chuckled, the noise drowned out as his fists transmuted into terrible anvils,

"Spikes are a poor weapon," he said, raising his lethal fists as he broke into a jog, his enemy setting himself to take the charge, "they break under the hammer; now!"

Flame poured into his back, Chandra expending everything she had and then sinking to her knees to dredge up more mana from the earth beneath her, a long way away. Whatever Koth was planning seemed to work, he soaked in the mana, skin flaring as though he could barely contain it before he became a brazen blur, rushing towards his foe so quickly she was caught unawares, Spikes also taken aback not just by his sudden speed but also the ground shifting beneath him, Kaguya with her palm on the earth and glaring at the armoured man vindictively. The two came together with an ear-splitting crack, Koth steaming into his opponent and knocking the armoured man prone with a juggernaught punch, catching the scythe by the hilt and stamping it into the soil before straddling his opponent. His fists became pistons, raining hell on the now-helpless knight and even for one who'd threatened a child as Spikes had Chandra winced at the savage beating he was on the receiving end of. It seemed to show no signs of stopping, Koth expending every scrap of his rage and their mana to beat the enemy that had wounded him to pulp; he shimmered in a heat haze and then he leapt back, chest heaving as her stumbled away from the crater he had battered his enemy into, waving her and Kaguya away as he stumbled back,

"Gather yourselves," he panted, gulping down air, "this isn't over."

"What, nothing could have…"

But the soratami was wrong; a dreadful blade reached skywards, an arm attached to it as the scythe butt bit into the cratered earth and its owner heaved himself upright, battered and dented but still very much alive. Rushing forwards regardless of the Vulshoks' orders Chandra hauled him backwards, looking between his fists and the unbroken plate mail of their opponent,

"How the hell is he moving; that would have shattered… anything!"

"Not anything," Koth replied, looking at his knuckles and seeing what he'd feared streaked across them, removed during his ferocious assault to reveal the truth; *paint, he disguised it with simple paint* ; "darksteel, bastard darksteel; where did you steal that from scum? Your masters gave you a fine collar!"

"What's darksteel, and don't say what he's wearing," Chandra quipped lamely, seeing the answer as Spikes turned to face them. His breastplate, pauldrons and part of his open-faced helm were no longer grey, they were as black as midnight, so dark they seemed to suck in all light as he slowly shook his head, recovering from the mauling,

"A metal from my world, almost unheard of," the Vulshok replied solemnly, heart aching at the sight the near-mythical substance being abused to make base armour, "it cannot be melted, it cannot be shaped and it cannot be broken - it yields to nothing, not even time."

"Just as well we don't have any of that then," the pyromancer said fatalistically, Kaguya joining them and looking as grim but determined as they felt, "we'll have to come up with something else."

Timothy was almost as frustrating to fight as Jhon'ee had been though in different ways; he fought exactly like the old man he was, slowly and with great care, but somehow his shorter weapons were always there to block the sural tips and his chants fell in perfect symphony with Gideons', cancelling out the enchantments he was trying to weave by equalling them entirely. However, much like the Kor, the white mage had a distinct feeling that his opponent wasn't actually trying to kill him; hell he even fought with his back to his ally, letting him see the girl sitting a long way from where Kiora stood guard over the now-twitching black mage. He was still pressing hard though, Gideon only not knocked flat by the aggressive use of cutlery by his own skills with his lash, something his opponent commented on as it knocked his hat askew,

"Strange bit of kit you've got there, what's it called?"

"A sural, and calling it a strange weapon is very odd from a man who fights with saucepans."

"You'd be amazed how many people underestimate the old duffer without a blade. Many's the bandit who limped off with a flattened skull after tangling with me I can tell you, and they don't take them off you at the ambassador's ball either, not something you'd get away I'd reckon. Not that you'd need your whip mind, your bindings are top-notch; took me over a minute to break the one you caught my friend in."

"Jhon'ee," the thought of facing her again made him miss a step, though luckily the venerable explorer was too far away to capitalise, "you freed her?"

"Couldn't leave her any more than you could leave the woman over there to die, though I went the long way around so we didn't bump into each other. Speaking of her though nice bit of work on delaying her bargains, let's just hope she's smart enough to realise it."

"Do you know what she's pledged to?" Timothy's face darkened,

"I can guess; still, it's not your concern my old fruit - something tells me that thanks to your binding she's about to learn an important distinction, and not before time."

"Dare I ask what, and is m… is Kiora in danger?"

"Call the mergirl what you like, she's in no danger from any of us. Even Exava, the one your friends' entertaining over there, won't attack children, no sport in it." Having caught glimpses of the other fight, Garruk weathering frenzied attacks like a mountain and driving his smaller opponent back with murderous swings, the hieromancer nodded,

"Glad to hear it but I think she'll find the Wildspeaker more than enough."

"Hopefully not in more ways than one," Timothy muttered, sparks of pure white mana flying as he clashed his pans together though Gideon was able to swat those he didn't avoid out the air with his lash, "she, ah, lives life to the full in every aspect if you catch my meaning - whether he wins or loses your friend is likely, no pun intended, screwed." Trying very hard to scrub that image from his mind Gideon thought down a different track,

"What about the necromancer - what did your spell do to her?"

"Ah, yes, that one I'm particularly proud of; done in its fair share of demons and devils I'll have you know, though oddly enough the angels don't like it much either," the explorer rambled before a crack of the whip and a resonant bong from his blocking skillet refocused his mind, "sorry, lost in thought. It's an enchantment that forces those it touches to immediately fulfil and have fulfilled the bargains they owe to any others. In her case her debtors paid her in mana and strength while she repaid them what she pledged in turn, all in the blink of an eye and doubtless very painful."

"So," Gideon hated the necromantic arts as much as most others did but even he could feel pity for the other planeswalkers' likely fate, "when that tablet shatters…?" Timothy nodded gravely, half an eye on the three figures set behind their duel,

"She'll learn, perhaps belatedly, the difference between what something is worth and its value."

She had been tense at first, trying to still her hands from shaking as she stood between her charge and the enemy but, as the human had simply sat down a good way away after waving once, Kiora was confident enough to risk a glance backwards as she heard movement behind her,

"Don't move," she hissed, stepping backwards as the scary lady seemed not to hear her, "stay still." Splitting her attention between two potential threats; she had no illusions about what would happen if Gideons' bindings came loose; the mergirl dropped back to put a hand on the humans' shoulder, pushing her back to the ground,

"You've got to move carefully," she said quickly, "there's a small plaque on your chest, if you pull it off you'll, well, it won't be good." The ebon mana wielder seemed bemused, not taking in the instructions and looking at her little guardian as though she'd never seen her before,

"I remember," she sat up slowly, stiff and in pain as Kiora shimmied away, wary of what she might do when her confusion cleared up, "ah, what happened to me?"

"Uhh, not sure," Kiora admitted delicately, "you were, badly off; we, Garruk and me this is, fed you green mana until Gideon managed to bind whatever was causing it away, that's why you can't take off or break that tablet or it'll get you again and nobody wants that." The necromancer seemed to take this on board for a moment, Kiora slightly confused; she had shared barely a dozen words with this woman in the past but something about her seemed amiss,

"No, I had best not," she said softly, glancing down at the images on the small brick of dried mud as though trying to read them, "where are, oh," she belatedly heard the battles around them and made to push herself to her feet, eyes fixed on one of the duelling figures, "there is the man I have to kill."

"No you don't," Kiora pushed in front of her, dagger down but looking determined, "I promised the others I'd take care of you so they could fight. Can you even channel any mana, uh, Lily?"

"Liliana and yes," a small trail of smoke knotted around her hand and, though she tried not to show it, Kiora was grateful to see nothing stand out on either her skin or Gideons' charm, "I can cha…" Unseen, a small but skilled hand made a gesture, ..".aaah!"

The shout almost made the mergirl drop her dagger as for a horrible second she feared the darkness would emerge again; Liliana had fallen to a knee, pale face a porcelain mask of agony as her smoke evaporated. Judging it was safe Kiora took a tentative step forwards as the woman recovered,

"What happened?"

"I, don't know," Liliana's voice, albeit pain-wracked, was surprisingly flat, "whatever that relic did is interfering with my mana, or this is."

"Don't take it off!"

"Do I look like a fool girl," she remembered drowning in that ocean of agony all too well, sustained only by strength from elsewhere but strangely enough she couldn't remember feeling anything else - the pain must have been too great.

"Don't know, I've done stupid things after Gideon told me not to," Kiora admitted, trying to defuse the womans' nasty expression even if she still seemed slightly… off; there was something not right about her, something the Zendikarian couldn't lay a fin on, "we're just lucky she's not getting involved." Those dangerous eyes, purple as deadly nightshade berries, raked over the, enemy?; *if she really is one - I mean the crazy woman fighting Garruk wants his hide but the old man doesn't seem so bad and if she wanted to I'd bet she could pummel us, especially while Liliana was out cold* ; who just waved back, the gesture causing a tremor through the necromancer that Kiora, fortunately, didn't see.

There was someone she didn't know, someone who likely knew or had an inkling of the man who'd humiliated her and snatched a prize from under her nose. She knew a hundred ways to kill such a person, even another mage, and a thousand ways to have the spirits of the dead confess their hidden secrets and the weakness of her enemies. Even without much mana, or even any at all, as one of the eldest remaining planeswalkers Liliana knew how to be resourceful and dangerous in a way other newer 'walkers never would; even

unaided she knew she could handle the girl watching them so why, as she pictured a myriad numbers of deaths she could have the ancient mans' friend die, did she feel nothing? Liliana knew she wanted to fight; her pride did not allow her to stay beaten by anyone. She could feel her blood thunder, her delicate nostrils flare at the thought of violence but that was all; there was no anticipation, no lust, no drive - what had that wretched white mage, either of them, done to her?

"Are," the voice made her break off her stare-down but where she would usually have smiled as the younger 'walker flinched she was untouched by the mergirls' fear; *what in all the hells is wrong with me?* ; "are you alright?"

"Of course I am," her voice snapped but her ire… she didn't feel it, not a lick of anger at the derogatory concern, a peeve of hers since her childhood more than two centuries ago, "your damned hero's' binding has choked off my mana and I'm stuck here with you, nothing in the Multiverse could be better."

"Hey you weren't my first pick either and if you bad-mouth my f… ," Kiora hastily back-tracked - they might be nominally on the same side but she wasn't going to tell this woman things like that, "my friend again I'll bubble you."

"Bubble me?" She should have laughed but it just wasn't funny; it should have been, both the words and how this child thought she could challenge her, "I'm terrified - I might die of hilarity."

"Better than dying because the shadows are eating you," the mergirl riposted and Liliana fell silent, her heart beating slightly faster for a reason other than battle-lust; *that insult should have rankled, I took in a sharp breath, I heard it!* ; "are you sure you're all right; you seem, different?"

"Different - we barely know each other girl."

"Yeah but, well, when we were all together you were, uh," Kiora thought of a way to put this without sounding rude, "joking, laughing, making fun of people, and you were mad when, ah, that man came in," and she had been, Liliana remembered how close she'd come to truly letting her unholy strength, both her own and that she'd bartered for, have free reign as her shame was rehashed to an audience but that was all it was, a memory, a picture in her mind seen as though through thick glass, "you're quiet now."

"I'm, thinking," the necromancer answered shortly when actually she was doing the opposite; even as her heart hammered she shied away from acknowledging the most likely cause - it was something else, some effect of having her power bound away that was doing this,

"Umm, Liliana?"

"What?"

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

"You just did," there was sarcasm in her tone but nowhere else; she carried on talking so she didn't have to think, "but carry on, I'm sure it'll be something to change the spin of the planes." The mergirl glowered at her; *it should be amusing, like a puppy growling but it's not, because - no, it's not that, it's something else* ; but then she looked away, seemingly embarrassed as she mumbled,

"Who's Josu?"

It wasn't the question that dragged Liliana Vess face to face with the terrible truth, it was her reaction to it; even as her expression morphed into one of terrible horror she felt nothing within,

"You were talking in your sleep; I'm sorry, I shouldn't really ask…"

"He was my brother," more to block the vision of his face, the terrible transformation that had damned him to torment and her to exile she

answered; anything, even her deepest secrets, were a worthy sacrifice to take her mind off the void now threatening to swallow her from within,

"Oh, umm, I wasn't listening, not really, but you said about, he died; I lost my father," Kiora said quickly, wishing she'd never started this conversation, "Roil took him, I don't really remember…"

"I killed him," that shut her up, both the confession and the utter lack of remorse in Liliana's tone; she sounded as though she was stating what she liked to eat for breakfast, "he was wounded, I was tasked to find a cure but was tricked. The cure I found was a poison, turned him into something worse than dead - I was banished because of it." Whatever Kiora had meant to say to this was lost as she looked into the womans' face; it was still impassive, her eyes still empty - but for the tear trickling down her cheek she could have been a statue given life, the thought so heart-breaking that despite her fear of the woman she stepped forwards, touching her closest arm tentatively,

"You're not okay are you?"

"No," Liliana's voice was choked, she felt water on her face but her tears fell with no meaning, no emotion behind them; her debts had finally come due, the price she had promised for her borrowed power taken by those she was bound to and leaving her bereft of something she had never known she needed until she saw her brothers' face and felt nothing, not even shame or sorrow, "no I'm not."

Attention torn in two directions Tamiyo wished, not for the first time, that she could split herself in twain as that thieving akki of legend could; to have that ability now, even for a moment, she would have shattered every mirror in Oboro clouded or otherwise.

Hovering above the battlefield she was forced to watch below and before at the same time, a veritable flock of paper cranes circling about her, each one bearing symbols of warding, protection and, in

some cases, illumination. The shadows were unsafe due to Splay-Paws' hidden depths so she burnt them away, memories of Kaguya's almost-death making her ignore fatigue and the cramp in her fingers as she sent what aid she could towards the others fighting for them all. Venser was still almost comatose, helpless after using his ability so quickly in succession with such a heavy load and the man he'd brought back was still bound to the artificers' injured friend; all three were reliant on her for their protection so she remained above them, forced to watch on as the others fought.

Whoever it was that had survived the onslaught of the two fire mages and Kaguya's herbs was something to be reckoned with; she had felt if not been affected by the attack he'd used to upset their barrage and then stood up from the attack of the iron-fleshed barbarian. She had never before seen or heard of a human bound to steel as he was; should they both survive this war his plane would be the next she sought out; and his strikes would have reduced a castle wall to rubble, but now his opponent duelled with all three of them once more, the quarters much closer as they refused to expose their friends to his murderous, methodical rampage.

Her only saving grace was that the reduced range had allowed her to join the fight, wisps of cloud and darts of paper slowing his assault and allowing the others to garner strikes of their own but even so he was still advancing, his weapon licking out ruinously at any who came too close. Breath catching as her fellow soratami stumbled, though Kaguya was able to turn the back-pedalling into a leap out of range of the deadly scythe, Tamiyo looked down at the figures beneath them and prayed to all the spirits of her world to watch over them.

Where am I?

Elspeths' first question was answered as soon as she formulated it and her second died under the impact of a terrible truth. Concerns like how she'd got here, where the others were all faded away in the face of something else, something far more terrible; she was on

Mirrodin, the home of the Hammer tribe and she knew what was lurking in their midst, the viper coiled at their bosom. She gasped, the image like a blade in both her heart and mind but she steeled herself, reciting old psalms and battle-codes to regain the tactical mind that had granted her honour underserved upon Bant and now, given the deception she had been taken in by, Mirrodin as well. Slowly, slowly she calmed the tumult in her mind, locking everything but the most basic facts away behind her mask of war; there was an enemy within and regardless of the face it wore she had to strike it down. Casting all other concerns from her mind she stepped forwards, moving towards the small settlement before her, a hand on the pommel of her blade and forcing herself on regardless of how leaden her feet felt, how her gorge rose as she realised the crime she was about to commit.

Her feelings of illness were not aided by those she passed; it was a forging day within the Hammer tribe and many of the nearby Vulshok had come for trade, contests and to cement new ties of kinship bound during and after the Phyrexian assault, an assault none of them knew still lingered. Every familiar face was a new torment, another stone chipping at her featureless mask as she raised a hand in greeting to the multitudes, smiling wanly as she put names to faces and deeds; *Vulm, who broke one of their hunting dogs over his knee and survived, old Luriz, best forger of the Helm tribe, Nurthus' grandfather.* It was a struggle to excuse herself from the press, the noise of ringing forges and Vulshok selling wares and armour to both their own and several families of Auriok, those of the plains now welcomed in the mountains as the invasion had weakened old hatreds,

"Elspeth"; *oh no* ; it had been hard avoiding the Vulshok, at the sight of the only other being on the plane not attached to metal at all she felt bile rise in her throat, Melira smiling before remembering herself and ducking her head, "sorry, my lady; I will remember one day."

"It, it's all right," she managed to stutter, not chastising her for the lack of knightly respect; by the end of the day, or the hour, she would

be as honourless here as she had proven upon Bant. Fortunately the Sylvok seemed relieved she wasn't going to be reminded of her squirely duties, disregarding her mentors' disquiet and smiling up at her,

"Are you enjoying the forging? Nurthu keeps trying to get me into the forges, I think," her squire glanced around before whispering conspiratorially, "I think she's trying to find me a, a compound but I still want to be a squire. What do you think?"

"I…" Elspeths' mind turned traitor, remembering her own time as a squire and, later, a knight in Bants' service; celibacy was not required but she had never found time or felt worthy of anothers' affections, "I think, you should enjoy the forging Melira. Where is Nurthu, I must," tell the Vulshok her beloved daughter was a seed of the evil that had almost cost them their home? "speak with her."

"She's at home with trouble," the Sylvok would never know the sliver of glass that nickname ground into her mentors' bleeding soul, nor how hard it was to hide the wound as the younger woman ducked her head once more, respect lacing her tone, "permission for dismissal?"

"G, granted," fortunately her squire didn't notice her slip, merely saying farewell and disappearing towards the press. Elspeth watched her go despite herself, wanting to drink in the memory of the girl, her last squire, for when her black business was done here she would never have another.

Meeting Melira had splintered her resolve, Nurthu all but snapped it in two, the Vulshok who had once cursed her as a deserter now smiling as she tentatively pushed aside the curtain that led into the home of the Hammer tribe leader,

"Elspeth, young sister," that hurt so much she wanted to die; she did not deserve a place in Koths' family, not with the intent now coiling in her heart, "come in, rest."

"Thank you," her voice was a strangled whisper that Nurthu thankfully didn't react to, her veins of glowing copper pulsing gently as she fed more coal into the forge, "is Koth here?"

"Nah, at the forging settling disputes," his compound spat, picking up thin sticks of metal and examining each with a critical eye, "rather him than me, I'd be settling them with fists not words." Plunging the ore into the fire and waiting for it to begin glowing Nurthu watched the flame and didn't see her murderous guest edging away towards the back of the room, speaking over her shoulder,

"Tiz is upstairs," the nickname had the knight hastily choking back a sob as the mother of the child she had to… to finish went on, "she's done her first forgings; you should see them."

Words would not come, the traditional congratulations for this first childhood milestone of the Vulshok going unacknowledged as Elspeth all but ran towards the stairs, halfway up them before reality caught up and crashed down on her. Collapsed against the stairwell she panted, breath ragged and harsh, nausea roiling in her stomach as she tried to banish all memories, all thoughts from her mind; there was only what she had to do, what she needed to do. The life of one girl, a hidden agent of their deadliest enemy, against the safety of a plane should be an easy choice so why did her hands shake, hardly able to grip the pommel of her sword? She counted the steps towards the curtain ahead as though mounting the gallows, each one requiring yet more will to ascend as she forced herself calm; she was a knight, a warrior and she had a monster to slay - what happened when the deed was done she would face then. It would be swift, a single stroke; she closed her eyes, tried to still her beating heart and the tremble in her fingers as she reached for the curtain, then in one movement she thrust the material aside, the braided copper decorations on it clinking as she stepped inside, sword half-drawn before she saw the creature she had come to kill.

She was facing away, on her knees in the corner and playing with something Elspeth couldn't pick out. Her blade whispered as she pulled it free another finger-length or so and then it stilled, the knight

gritting her teeth as she tried to look past the disguise to the evil beneath. She was metal Koth had assured her, the Vulshok legend of the being that would mimic Mirrodins' creator made real by her existence but despite this the little girl appeared more a sister of Melira than related to her own kin. A curtain of dusty hair flopped to her shoulders, her small frame unmarked by the metal all others of the plane shared - she looked, felt and even smelt mortal. Elspeth had held the girl while she cried or laughed, chased her when her mother or father were unable to but all those things were a lie; it wasn't real, she had…

"L'beth?" Instinctively she took in the one who spoke her mangled name and her breath caught, her fingers so tight on her sword pommel she could barely feel them as the girl stood up with a happy smile, tottering only a little as she came forwards. One strike, just a single blow she wouldn't even feel; not even a training strike would have been simpler but she couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breath as the girl stopped in front of her and held something up proudly. It was a small, vaguely humanoid figure, crudely forged from a scrap of iron like most Vulshok toys and made exceptional only by the white material draped around it,

"It 'ou," she gabbled, the small cape she'd tucked around her dolls' neck flashing as she waved it, driving back imaginary enemies, "L'beth 'ight, she bave," the girl stopped and Elspeth saw her hollow visage reflected in Tiszta's eyes, confused, innocent, *living* eyes,

"Why 'ou sad?"

Elspeth Tirel, knight of Bant, slayer of Phyrexians and hero of Mirrodin, shattered.

Her war-mask was gone and her with it, driven to her knees as grief, loathing and outright hatred tore her apart from within; what was she doing, what kind of *demon* was she to think of murdering this child, an innocent hope in all this darkness? She wanted to die, to be anywhere other than in the midst of a family she had almost destroyed; she had to leave and never come back, never put Koth,

his compound and his beautiful daughter at risk from her madness again. She sniffed hard, placing one foot under her and made to speak to the girl, one good thing on this sad and war-weary plane when she saw the walls around them both and felt first confusion, then horror. This was not Mirrodin, this could not be real but Tiszta was before her; had she 'walked to her ancient doom without realising it? It was a punishment she deserved but the girl, the innocent before her spoke and there was a tremor in the adopted Vulshoks' voice,

"I s'ared."

"Don't be," she whispered, instinctively hugging the child and pressing her lips through wire so fine and soft it felt more real than her own cropped hair, stilling her fear for the sake of another as she heard dripping water, "stay close to me, close your eyes; I'll get you home." She didn't know if Tiszta did as she was bid but could spare little time to think of it; there was movement behind the portal, claws upon the door; Elspeth stilled and then stood - whatever was coming would not claim Tiszta; she would not let the monster snuff out Mirrodin's light. All was as she remembered it, the others nearby hushed and resigned but not her, not when she had some measure of penance to serve. There was a ring of steel as her hands found their sureness, her blade withdrawn as she stepped before her friends' child, the squeal of the portal echoing as she set her stance and faced down the monster in the doorway.

In those dead eyes she saw her face, tear-streaked, white but this time unmoving, not cringing from the thing as it approached and why would she? She almost took a step back from disbelief, not fear; the creature, the Phyrexian that moved towards her and Tiszta was limping, its gait unsteady, nothing like the war machines she, Koth, Venser and the others had hewn down before. It was pitiful, and she heard her voice without realising she was speaking,

"Leave now," it was honourable surrender, the requirement of a Bantic knight to offer an overmatched opponent a chance to quit the field - was she truly so far above this thing she would offer it mercy,

"leave me and mine untouched and I will sheathe my blade unsullied." It either didn't hear or didn't care, stretching up to its full height to reveal corroded pipes and rusted metal and Elspeth took a last look over her shoulder. Tiszta, the girl she would live and die for to atone for her terrible misjudgement, was out of range and so she moved, a single slice spilling the things' unnatural guts with a minimum of spatter, the Phyrexian falling like all the others before it had. She wasted a second, no more, looking down at the thing and flicking gore off her blade before listening for any alarm, any hint it would be missed before whispering,

"Keep your eyes closed Tiz, I'm going to get you out of… who are you?" Her sword was up without thought but there was something familiar about the stranger stood where there had been no-one before; she had seen him before, she knew that, but where eluded her as he stepped forwards,

"I'm a friend," his tone was hoarse and the awe, for want of a better word, in his voice made her feel uncomfortable, "you brave, noble woman - I couldn't," he shook his head, wiping away tears before slowly extending a hand, "I wish I had time to tell you how strong you are but we have to go now."

"Go?" A sudden panic shot through her, "I'm not leaving without Tiszta!"

"You'll never be without her," his tone was somehow soothing as he reached her, a sense of lifting making Elspeth relax, her weapon lowered as the sensation enveloped her, "it's time to go back."

She was being carried, the strangest feeling of moving and staying still almost making her laugh; everything around her blurred, the walls melting and sloughing away as she and the man floated away, a pressure she had never realised becoming less and less as she ascended into a deepening darkness that held no fear. Quiet descended, all around her was still and blank, the only sensations she could feel was warm earth under her, slightly shivering for some reason, snuffling breathing nearby and rain falling onto her face, just

above her eyebrows, nothing to impede her sudden, content… actually that last one was quite annoying, so much so that she fully awoke to brush the fluid off, taking in the scene around her as she opened her eyes. She was looking up at a blue sky, partially blocked out by a face overhead, a face she recognised through the tears,

"You," she said slowly before realising her head was on this strange man's lap and turning pink, "what, what happened?" The stranger took a deep breath, regathering some composure,

"I'm so sorry - I don't, not without permission any more but I had no choice."

"Where are we; what happened to Mir - Tiz! Where is she?" Elspeth made to sit up but a hand on her shoulder dissuaded her, the stranger speaking before she could start fighting him off,

"She's safe, on Mirrodin; listen to me Elspeth, my name is Jace Beleren of Ravnica, a mind-mage. One of our enemies, a knight, he told you something - do you remember? It was about the girl, Tiszta?" The name focussed her memory, all of it and she stilled, going white in horror at the remembered knowledge and what she had thought was the right thing to do…

..".and you didn't do it!" The whisper was fierce, the mind-mages' eyes aglow and tingeing her face blue as he tore through her recriminations, "If you believe nothing else I ever say believe that nothing you're remembering now is false! Everything in that dream was made from your memories; Mirrodin, Nurthu, the children, all of it; I put them in a different order to give you a choice Elspeth. Everything you did," he had to break off, snatching a breath and rasping his eyes on his sleeve to soak the tears away, "it was all you!"

"I, I could have…"

"Let me tell you what I saw Elspeth Tirel," Jace went on, impaling her ramblings with a piercing gaze, "I saw someone tortured by horrors I

can't, I don't want to understand, who found and lost a home through no fault of her own and was then dragged into a war against her former torturers. I saw someone ready to sacrifice everything, even her life, to see that struggle won and when it was she took a girl affected by those monsters under her wing, shielding her as she had never been protected herself. Even in peace she trained daily, ready to defend her friends, her family against a vague threat and when she was told part of that family might be the daughter of that evil she not only spared the child, she stood in front of nightmares to save her. You could have killed Tiszta, or left her in the pit you escaped from but you didn't," Jace breathed again, mastering his emotions to speak solemnly as Elspeth gazed up at him silently, absorbing his words, "you chose not to kill or abandon a child you have every right to hate - if there's a plane of existence where that's the wrong choice I have not and will never set foot there."

He could say no more, there was nothing more he could feasibly do - duplicating and reordering memories in such a fashion was taxing even in when they were donated into his mind as Chandra did following one of her expeditions ceasing; to do so within someone elses' head was exponentially more difficult. He was mentally drained, physically shaking from the backlash and as he felt a pressure lift off his knees, Elspeth rolling onto all fours, he felt trepidation rise; had it been enough? She had her back to him, her cape now stained by sand and mud as he saw her shoulders rise and fall; he wanted to say something, give her an idea of how humbled her memories had made him feel but she moved before he could speak. Her eyes were on him, no long lost or unseeing and some of his weariness sloughed away, his heart soaring as he realised the healing was at least begun; *and continued when we're out of here, a thousand times over if I have to* ;

"Thank you Jace Beleren," Elspeth's voice was sincere and Jace found something else he had to be grateful to Chandra for; there was a definite art to taking a pat on the shoulder from someone wearing gauntlets without getting hurt. This done, the knight settling back on her heels and regarded him severely,

"What happened after the battle, and where's my sword?" He blinked, forgetting how much of a warrior she truly was,

"Venser has your sword and, uh," this was going to be awkward, "we're under a spell of mine that blocks out sound, I needed it to scry your mind. The battle's still going on," he glanced over her shoulder and she shuffled half-around, freezing at the sight before speaking again in a much harder voice,

"Drop your sorcery," Jace did and then winced at the sudden clamour, though Elspeth was unmoved as she stood to her full height and strode away. He also came to his feet, swaying as a tremendous headache bloomed like a black lotus but staying lucid enough to hear the knight regard her friend,

"What have you done to yourself?" Somehow Venser managed a laugh, still hurting as though he'd been stretched to infinity by his teleportation and feeling his age,

"I'll be fine in a few minutes," he painfully reached down, dragging the sword Kaguya had left in his keeping across his knees, "so, any chance of love on the battlefield for this old man?." Elspeth tried to bite down a smile as she reached for her weapon and half-succeeded, though as she swung the blade a few times the emotion bled away, her gaze frigid as she looked forwards to the melee as a terrible hue began to surround her,

"Stay behind me," the words were cold and Jace scrambled to obey, realising getting between her and her enemy was likely to be a good way of getting boot-prints on his chest, "this ends now."

The beast within was straining at its leash but Garruk wasn't about to unshackle it; this was not a solitary hunt, though his new pack was divided he couldn't risk being separated in case one of them needed his help pulling down their own prey. His opponent was mad, missing only the foam at her mouth as she continually charged in, taunting the edge of his longer reach to lash out with her small, fire-blackened

blade. He'd had stings worse than the wounds she'd caused but her twitching, tremulous reactions made her difficult to hit and she seemed impervious to pain; even the blow from the butt of his axe which had sent her flying a dozen paces had done little more than wind her for a moment. He would need to be patient, wear her madness down just as he had with other smaller, quicker beasts; he could and often did go days and nights without sleep, he doubted she could do the same even if her voice was annoying,

"Such a beast," she crooned, licking the steel melted into her ruined fist in a way he guessed was meant to be sensual, "it'll take days, maybe weeks to break you I'd wager."

"I do not bow to the collar bitch," the Wildspeaker warned, his inner animal stirring at the threat of enslavement and then again at her mad cackle,

"Not at first, no, no, you need to be trained before you're worthy of collaring," she told him, bending backwards under the sweep of his weapon and then springing dexterously to the side as his kick threatened to shatter her legs, "we're ever in need of strong backs and hard arms. We can give you ecstasy you've never dreamed possible," her sharpened teeth were exposed in a softer smile than he'd seen before and he realised with a jolt she was being serious, "join the cult large one, let your inner demon run wild with the Rakdos." Though he never took his eyes from the blood-witch he actually did consider the offer, though not for long,

"No; the lands are my home." He prepared to receive her curse and a renewed attack but to his surprise the mad witch regarded him forlornly,

"Shame," she sighed, scratching her cheek with her blade, "you could have been a true ringmaster in our circuses. Still, if you won't play I'll find those who will!"

Garruk saw her hand move and leapt aside but not far enough, caught unaware by this new weapon. The loud explosives she had

kept him at bay with were hellish on his sensitive ears and nose but this one was the foulest of the lot; it didn't explode as the others had but the stink of it was enough to send him reeling. Weaving his weapon about him and frantically trying to stop his eyes watering at the stench Garruk awaited the pain of her attack; he was used to pain, he would survive but none was forthcoming. As he finally cleared the evil cloud he couldn't hear her and that was worrying, only when he looked about for his insane opponent did he realise what the point of that attack had been a bellowed out a warning to those she was rushing towards.

It was remarkable, Chandra decided as she helped her new soratami friend limp away from the now-raging battle, Kaguya suffering a long gash down her arm from the point of the whickering scythe, just how easy it was stereotype the different mages in the Multiverse. For example everyone knew those bound to the mountains were impulsive hot-heads with wild tempers and short fuses and to a certain degree it was true; *quite a high degree in my case, or it used to be at least* . Similarly Vraska was growing skilled in the use of black mana but that didn't mean she raised the dead, her magic was more specialised in decay and putrefaction, life from death rather than necromancy. However the traditional ideas did persist and Chandra had been suckered in by them a small way, thinking those who drew their strength from the plains were often the most agreeable and sought after of the mage-kind as their arts were based around community, healing and generally finding better ways than fighting to end a fight.

However when Elspeth Tirel reinforced their formerly-desperate rearguard the pyromancer was given a timely reminder some sun mages were also well-skilled in the fine art of rend and slaughter.

Hastily binding up Kaguya's torn arm and grateful the soratami seemed in fair health, though maybe a touch paler than normal, she fell back to a safe distance and caught her breath, Koth alongside them with his eyes on his friend and sweat steaming from his chest

and shoulders. The fight had been brutal and how they were all still alive Chandra doubted she'd ever know; their wounds were mostly superficial, Kaguya's the worst but more bloody than actually damaging; *and her blood seems thinner than mine, not that knowing that helps at all.* She felt weary, exhausted by more than just overuse of mana as her mail was glowing again; as the adrenaline began to fade away she had to fight the urge to sink to her knees, preparing whatever she had left to help the sword wielder if her duel went awry.

She could scarcely follow the dance of blade and scythe, parry and riposte being exchanged so quickly it was all a flash of black metal against white. The two twisted, danced and stepped in an elaborate ritual, sparks shining as their weapons clashed. At a barked order from Koth none were interfering, none could realistically dare as they were as likely to hit friend as foe in the close melee but it seemed Elspeth needed no aid. Wherever the black blur was her sword was there to turn it, Spikes preserved from harm only by the haft of his weapon and the unnatural resilience of his armour as he stepped backwards, weaving a net of ebon parries about himself the sun mage didn't try to push through,

"You have some spine," even in a life or death battle his voice never changed, "I have told you the truth yet you still fight?"

"You did and I do," her words were as cold as his, "defend yourself." Another blistering series of attacks rang off each other, Chandra having a hard job keeping her eyes off the fight and on the soratami's wound though Kaguya seemed better skilled in healing than she was,

"You would defend the dream of Yawgmoth?" *Yawgmoth?* ; she and Kaguya shared a look, shock of the name overcoming the shock of those white eyes but before either could speak there was a blaze before them. Elspeth's blade glowed like the heart of a star and in its light her face, devoid of emotion, was more terrible than even the most fearsome blood-soaked barbarian as she regarded her opponent pitilessly,

"I would never protect anything of Phyrexia. But to my damnation, death and beyond I will defend Tiszta of the Hammer…" She pressed with more speed, greater strength than before, her mana augmenting her strikes as she flew into her attack,

..".daughter of Koth of the Hammer…" the Vulshok started,

..".and Nurthu of the Helm…" steel rang off darksteel and Spikes was stepping back, struggling to block the attacks flowing into each other as freely as her words did,

..".sister to Melira…" her blade had glowed, now it shone, her enemy unable to look directly at the weapon that sought to end him,

..".pride of the Vulshok…" glancing around Chandra saw the geomancer and beckoned Kaguya to follow her, the moonfolk with her sleeve stained by blood but tied off with mist and cloth,

..".Mirrodin's light…" they crept quietly around the duel as Elspeth bulled her opponent back, Spikes seemingly overawed as much by her words as the strikes he was flailing to keep at bay,

..".and if she so chooses…" Koth heard them coming over; Chandra saw tears on his face as they arrived and together they watched his friend fight with sword and conviction together,

..".and her parents bless me so…" The Vulshok sniffed and, surprisingly, Kaguya placed her uninjured hand on his shoulder, the two shared a look that spoke volumes before the crash of metal on metal dragged their attention forwards again. They could barely see either knight, the dark one a blot of blackness against a radiant sea, tongues of light and darkness licking out at each other rather than blades,

"She is strong," the soratami said, Koth nodding as he gently held her comparatively tiny hand in his metallic claw,

"She has always been strong," he replied thickly, remembering the countless times she had stemmed the tide during the dark days of the resistance and how she had never allowed herself to take credit for her victories; *she thought herself unworthy - from now on she will know better, even if I have to brand it on her forehead so she sees it in the mirror* ; "your friend has the gratitude of my plane for helping her." The reminder made Chandra jump,

"Jace."

"Go to him and Venser-san," the soratami urged her and she needed no second bidding, Elspeths' last roars ringing in her ears,

..".my squire!" The knight of Bant reared back, her enemy mimicking her, everything going into a final attack; light met darkness and the world held its breath before a single metallic chime gave lie to a legend.

Darksteel could break.

As the head of the terrible scythe, still dyed with moonfolk, human and Vulshok blood, tumbled from the shorn black staff all eyes tracked its slow spinning progress, all eyes save two. On a knee following the blow she had channelled every iota of mana she could control into Elspeth reversed the strike, taking him in the back of the leg. Off-balance her adversary had no choice but to buckle, collapsing forwards and kneeling as she surged to her feet, sword spinning as though alive and she raised it point-down, aiming between those terrible grey eyes reflecting her flawless battle-mask, the last thing they would ever see as she whispered rather than called her last declaration,

"She is not and will never be Phyrexian'."

The tip of her blade plunged down.

In perfect honesty Kiora had no idea about half of what she was being told but if her varied experiences with Gideon had taught her one valuable skill, it was how to look interested.

Whatever was wrong with Liliana the black mage wasn't going to divulge and she had enough sense not to ask; instead she listened as the woman talked. What she was saying didn't seem to matter as much as the fact she was saying something, even if it was in a flat voice that carried no inflections; the mergirl nodded here and there, maybe put in a word or two when it seemed appropriate and above all hoped that something would change to snap the necromancer back to her usual self,

"Hey there"; *anything but that* ; she span at the sudden voice, cursing herself for forgetting they were all still in danger but grateful that the other woman, her eyes as green as deep-sea coral, skidded back several paces with her arms in the air, "easy, I'm not here for a fight."

"Good, I'd beat you to pulp," Kiora affirmed a lot more bravely than she felt and breathing a silent sigh of relief when the woman laughed,

"I don't doubt you would but anyway, listen; I'm not out to get you, either of you though in your case that's a pity," Liliana was subject to a glare but didn't react to it; *she really must be sick* ; "but if it gets back to Spikes I've just been sat here you won't believe the ear-chewing I'm going to get later." Despite herself Kiora smiled,

"I might believe it, he can be just as bad," she could see Gideon in the distance, his attention still occupied by the old man who'd started this whole thing with those books, "it's pointless fighting me, I don't know any real duelling magic."

"And I'd be worried if you did - you should be having fun at your age, I was," Mel admitted with a conspiratorial wink, "but I heard something that got my attention, what's your bubble?"

"My, oh that," Kiora laughed, a little self-consciously, "it's uh, well it's a spell I made."

"You made it - wow, wish I'd been doing that at your age. What's it do?"

"Gets people who can't swim around flooded temples for a start," the merfolk muttered, recalling a couple of narrow scrapes with a grimace, "but, well it's like a protection sphere; I based it on trapper-weed, it's a kind of kelp on Zendikar, nasty one too. It's full of these really thin little bubbles, things swim into them but they can't swim out."

"That's clever; tell you what," Mel seemed to decide something, clapping as she faced the merfolk again, "you know I'm not going to do anything - if I wanted to we'd be fighting now right?"

"Right?"

"So you put up a bubble and I'll test it out. Not badly," she was quick to reassure the trepid merfolk, "let's see what it can stand up to."

"Uh," Kiora glanced at her supposed charge only to see her not looking at anything, lost in her crippling dolour, "okay, stand back a bit," she reached down, this time with her flippered toes rather than her fingers, and the water beneath her pitched and rolled, breaking up from the soil in a thin sheet all around. Raising her arms dramatically, and probably unnecessarily, Kiora had the film close over the top of her and Liliana's heads, encasing them in a protective, translucent dome. Keeping one foot on the floor to ensure the structure didn't destabilise and splash down, something she wasn't phased by but Liliana might be, she saw the lips of her opponent moving and shook her head, miming that the bubble blocked out sound.

Mel nodded and walked around it, ripples springing up here and there as she tapped it experimentally; Kiora felt the ripples through her mana and strengthened the shield without making it too rigid,

something she knew from experience would shatter it. It stood up well to taps, then slaps but at punches it started to wobble dangerously, the mergirl having to set her mind to dissipate the impact before it shook her shield apart. As she concentrated however she saw something else through her slightly smeared defences and waved frantically at her mock-aggressor, gesturing her to look left. Mel cocked her head and then flicked a glance that way before regarding her with a secretive smile, putting a finger to her lips before attacking again. *Why would she… oh* ; she realised what the plan was but had no idea why someone content to sit out a fight before was angling for one now, especially against the two figures she could see rushing over; *strange landling that one is. Still, that's her out the way for the time being, might as well stay in here with Cheery* ; the thought made her stifle a groan but at the sight of the once vivacious, if somewhat cruel woman sharing her isolated space she couldn't help but feel a little pity, tentatively placing a hand on her shoulder and never knowing how much that simple contact would mean in the near future.

Spinning her staff into a guard pose Nissa took stock, she'd never seen anything like what was before them but blocked it out at the sight of the one attacking it,

"Melanie Vynsacher," the woman looked over, "leave them alone."

"Why do you care, they're not elves."

"We don't harm the young of anyone," she retorted, straining to keep her temper despite remembering what had become of her last time she'd lost it, "the Joraga fight warrior to warrior…"

"So why would I fight you, I already kicked your scrawny rear end; hell fishy in there'll probably give me a better fight than you did soon as I bust her out."

"You will not," Vraska put in, the gorgon slightly behind the fleeter elf as Nissa nodded in agreement. Mel looked between the two of them in surprise before folding her arms,

"Okay then I'll bite; what's to stop me doing what I did before and using your ears for nail files?" Nissa glowered, her spear aimed at the humans' heart as she prepared the plan she'd decided on during their run here, bracing herself to eat a bitter fruit,

"This; Vraska would you mind helping me, ah, kick this womans' overlarge rear end?"

Even the gorgon looked stunned, the quiet persisting until Mel snorted, hunching over helplessly and fighting off outright mirth,

"Seriously, you actually asked… wow, poisonous mushrooms really can change their spots! I'm speechless, I really am - just for that fine, absolutely fine, please say yes." Recovering her composure Vraska regarded the elf closely; Nissa appeared sincere but she knew enough of pride to realise those forced to dine on it often choked - best to be sure she wasn't planning to stab her in the back somehow,

"On one condition; apologise."

"I already did." Vraskas' symbiotes swayed as she shook her head,

"Not to me, to her; she said you tried to kill her before," the gorgon explained as both Nissa and Mel looked at her amazed, "she's done nothing I know of to deserve that. Apologise to her and I will help you."

"But - very well"; *she helped me - I must repay that debt* ; her spine felt as stiff as a decade old tree but she forced it to creak forwards, her bow the bare minimum of respect towards her foe as her cheeks heated up, "I, apologise, for trying to have you executed."

"Sorry what was that?" The human was cleaning her ear with one of her smallest fingers, "I wasn't listening, could you say it again? Calm down, I'm just joking," she sighed as Nissa growled, "I can guess how much that hurt so I accept. So, two on one then," she raised her fists, dropping into a loose stance, "bring in on - whoa!" As her

opponent was tossed into the air by the vine she'd sprouted underground Nissa's grin was wolfish, stretching wider as she poisonous darts she had the elemental spit at her momentarily helpless foe lodged home. Even with the venom however the woman was able to right herself in the air, landing with her blade in hand and a gush of water, stained green with poison, seeping out from under her cloak,

"Seriously what is it with you and the greenery; I already said that's not my thing," Mel sounded more alarmed than anything else, "and I thought we were fighting woman to wo-, well, woman to she-elf?" Nissa snorted, holding her spear ready and with her mana already infiltrated through the ground,

"Why would I fight your fight?" Mel's green eyes widened, then she grinned, her last words called out just before she bounded away from another subterranean assault,

"Good, you can learn."

Even with Vraskas' aid however the battle seemed a stalemate; Mel was, as she had found out the hard way last time, best suited for close range but that didn't mean she was easy to contain. Her skill with evasion magic was something the elf was hard-pressed to counter and Vraska wouldn't use her gaze, both because she didn't want to kill the woman and there was a risk of innocents being caught by its deadly effect. It devolved into a game of tactics, Nissa penning the woman in as best she could while Vraska, far more dangerous hand to hand due to greater strength, venomous teeth and dangerous symbiotes that, though they lacked her venom, came with lamprey-like mouths, engaged her hand to hand, shrugging off the worst damage due to her scales. Both sides were making little headway though Nissa was pleased to see a volley of hardened grass stalks nick Mels' ear as retribution for her earlier actions but were caught unaware by the uninvited gatecrasher to their party, heeding the warning call too late.

She had him dead to rights, then he disappeared straight through the floor; Elspeth was stumbling to avoid skewering her foot at the sudden lack of resistance, Koth still trying to believe their enemy wasn't dead when with a thrill of horror Kaguya realised what had happened,

"Splay-Paw!" Her vision, still changed from the time she could not truly remember when she had been herself-and-more, turned the world into shades of white and grey and she spotted the danger just as it was cast, "Tamiyo look out!"

As Venser accepted the other mans' hand up and made to comment about his intentions with his knightly friend it was his experience, longer than almost any other 'walkers, that let him feel the slightest touch of mana. Compared to the explosions caused by the others, especially Elspeth in her rampaging duel, it was a breath through a curtain, the subtlest of knives and all the more dangerous for that. Even as he saw where it had come from, heard Kaguyas' call and pushed Jace aside to help it was too late, a flash of silver had left the blue womans' hand, her aim true; there was nothing he could do to stop the weighted rope snaring the airborne soratami. Tamiyo was rocked by the impact, the bola winding around her and then she fell, her floating scrolls collapsing alongside her as her flight spells were unravelled by a gleam of blue on the metal. Venser didn't think, didn't have time to; ignoring how much he hurt he forced himself to move as only he could, arms up; he felt an infinitesimal time of being in two places at once, a jolting, tearing pain as his teleportation ended, a crashing weight that bore him to the floor and a rush of heat close by, one he could only hope the bastard nezumi burned in as the pain overwhelmed him and he fought to cling to consciousness.

Chandra was the only one who saw exactly what happened; firstly there was a ripple, a shimmer like a mirage that revealed someone stood where no-one had been before, a figure she suddenly recognised from the flash of yellow on her otherwise azure flesh as she whirled something overhead and let it go. Even as she wondered what the Kor from Zendikar was doing here something

monstrous erupted from the ground behind her, her shadow bulging obscenely before being torn in two, a nightmare emerging from it that mercifully disentangled itself into two other figures. One was familiar and hated for that familiarity, the other was unfamiliar and hated because it looked like something only a particularly disturbed Simic neonate could dream up. Even as she watched these enemies, for anyone who stood with Spikes was not a friend, and tried to work out where they'd come from the rat-like thing streaked away, far more quickly than anything that foul had any right to be, running straight towards; *like hell you are!*

Elspeths' intervention had let her recover a little, enough to draw a line of fire between the monster and the crumpled pile resulting from the Kor's thrown bola. The rat-thing just pulled a halt before the impassable barrier and raged like a denied goblin, stomping its feet before whipping around to face her; its eyes were black as midnight and she glanced away in disgust for an instant that almost cost her everything. When she looked back there were shards of darkness flying towards her, a swarm of daggers multiplying and giving her nowhere to go; hastily calling on every flicker of flame she had left the pyromaster caught light, hoping to prevent some of them sinking home before a swirl of blue and white filled her flaming gaze and she heard a grunt, heart seizing as she realised what had happened,

"Jace," the mind-mage had thrown himself in front of her, taking the blades in her stead and now all she could see was his cloak sagging as he staggered backwards, "Jace are…?"

" *I'm all right*," she could have collapsed in relief, " *seen that spell before. Now*," he stepped back shoulder to shoulder with her, his azure eyes meeting her burning ones as the daggers his snaring spell had plucked from the air wisped into nothingness, "we've got some enemies to kill."

"Them first, then you; don't scare me like that," she riposted, gauntlet flaring with power, "you take the Kor, I'll toast the rat." The creature who'd almost killed her and, more unforgivably, almost made Jace

sacrifice himself to save her went rigid, not even its whiskers twitching as it glared at her,

"Rat-sama to you! Fine-fine - one head for contract but yours I take for honour - Spikes!"

The darksteel knight, his scythe lost but still on his feet next to the Kor regarding them, suddenly shifted, the swords at his back blurs of metal as he flung three to his partner. The rat leapt up to meet them and Chandra swallowed, words echoing in her mind as he landed and faced them again; *Venser was right, he is a lot more dangerous than he looks* ; and considering he now held a blade in each hand and another in his tail that was quite some achievement. Preparing herself as his friends also advanced, Spikes with a sword in either fist and the Kor just behind, her hands free despite the spear across her back, Chandra had an instant to fear before now-familiar voices behind her soothed the worry; *at least we're not alone in this* ;

"I'll keep the fire up," she whispered, Jace nodding as runes shimmered before him; the clash could only be seconds away, "Venser and his friend should be safe behind it."

"I'll handle the Kor, she bears the touch of the sea."

"Spikes is mine," Koth rumbled, loathing in his eyes as the black knight marched towards the half-rat, "those are normal blades, they won't touch me; I'll tear that darksteel shell off piece by rusting piece."

"And Splay-Paw has been a dagger in our side too long; Elspeth-san, would you…?"

"Of course," the knight faced her next challenge unswervingly, trusting the Vulshok to handle his opponent as she locked eyes with the smaller sword-wielder, "first him, then the other."

"Watch the nezumi, his shadow-craft… no," the soratami gardener didn't need her gifted vision to see what was happening, "his armour,

he will walk through the flames!"

"Mine; Chandra burn the woman," Koth was already charging towards the dark knight, Spikes not breaking stride as he faced the wall of flame, Elspeth veering off towards the rat that ran to meet her, the Kor wove something Jace disassembled with a spell as heat seared his left shoulder and the battle was on.

Bound fast atop her almost comatose friend; this would certainly not be making it into her chronicles. Trying to slip an arm free from the metal twine that had drained her flight kanji Tamiyo found indignity heaped upon shame as the pillow under her spoke,

"Pretty sure people pay good money for this on some planes."

"Hush," she demanded, trying to get out of the binding and cursing as it only made things worse, "can you move at all Venser-san?"

"Tamiyo I only haven't passed out because you're on top," the artificer was either too far gone to realise the innuendo or didn't care and, as she saw the silhouette loom through the flames, she quickly realised she couldn't afford to either,

"You have to stay awake Venser, one of them is coming," honorifics were forgotten over survival as she came up with a last-ditch plan, "I have a mirror at my waist. You have to reach it, I cannot move." He didn't reply and for a heart-stopping second she feared he'd lapsed into unconsciousness but then she felt his gloved fingers edge slowly, agonisingly slowly down her flank and across. As she forced herself still she considered the unique sensation; a curious blend of shame at her helplessness, gratitude that Venser would help her despite his own suffering, determination that her scheme would work and fear at the figure who stepped through the fire without breaking stride.

Seeing the man who'd held off three planeswalkers this close was a different scroll from the figure she'd seen at a distance. Here the spines jutting from his armour looked like they could rasp flesh from

bones, his twin blades sharp enough to cut a blood-oath and even poor Kaguya, who had suffered so much and been changed by her trials, she could put warmth into her gaze; his held none as he stepped forwards, not hearing Vensers' whispered

"Got it," as he span his slightly longer blade around,

"My associate needs your head." His voice made her shiver as well; she had only seconds to act and took one to prepare herself, another to whisper,

"Hold on to it; sorry," and then she moved, bucking her hips to toss the artificers' limp hand upwards, her mirror clasped hard in his palm. Cringing at Vensers' explosive gasp as she quickly sat up and pressed her full weight into him the soratami contorted enough to lean down and bite the back of his glove, dragging it and the mirror held within up as she channelled her mana through the polished medium. It was one of the first spells taught to all her kind and it was still effective; caught out by her unexpected defiance her enemy followed her motion and his eyes met the mirror. There his attention stayed and would continue to stay, held by his own reflection until she released the enchantment, something she refused to do even if casting silently reaped a far greater toll than normal.

Her survival, and Vensers as well, depended on her concentration and even for a moonfolk she was patient; the artificer had been, no he was her friend and had saved her from her assassin in the past, it was her turn to repay the favour. Even when the aches began in her jaw and spine Tamiyo denied them, set as though in stone to keep their opponent at bay; only when a rock-breaking punch was slammed into the side of the ornate helm, hurling the knight off his feet and far away did she finally stop drop Vensers' hand, working her jaw at the taste of old leather. Trying to both stretch and remain still she found herself meeting eyes with Venser's old friend and hastily looked away, embarrassed at the amusement in his eyes as he reached down,

"You get all the luck," the Vulshok stated to his prostrate friend, Venser still awake enough to chuckle slightly, the motion jostling the soratami perched on his stomach as Koth gripped her bindings,

"You're the one who got compounded," he breathed back, Tamiyo bounding off of him as after the geomancer quickly snapped the bolas wrapped around her, "sorry but I don't think I'm going to be much use in this. Bring back the days when I could move across half the Multiverse without feeling like a herd of rhox ran me over."

"Those days were a long time ago," Koth pointed out, jabbing his friends' age before sobering up and facing down his enemy, "you are going to wish you were dead before I let you die slag-stain."

"And I will not allow you to kill him Koth-san," regathering her things Tamiyo stood beside him and in front of the prone Venser; like most moonfolk she rarely became angry but this was an exception; *first this man then the nezumi, neither of them leave this place alive* ; "he has a great penance to pay." She half-expected him to order her to look after Venser but instead he nodded,

"He does, more than you know; you control the mana of the sea?"

"And the clouds, and both are vengeful this day."

"Good," Koths' fists were surrounded by redness, his eyes fixed on the blades now pointing at the pair of them as Spikes threw off the effects of his punch, "you bind and blind him, I'll tear him apart!"

Wherever this thing was from, Elspeth decided, she needed to visit there at least once to discover how he'd learned to fight. Her opponent, Splay-Paw if she'd heard Kaguya's whisper right, was a capering whirlwind of flashing swords and foul oaths, his small stature and chaotic movement making him damned near impossible to hit while the three blades he used were everywhere. Though she'd fought Phyrexian machines with more weapons than the nezumi she'd never fought one that had his skill; if not for her armour and

Kaguya's assistance she'd likely have been hobbled at best, outright slain at worst before she caught onto the rudiments of his style,

"I only need kill one of you," the rodent chattered in his high-pitched voice, blocking a sweeping blow with the blades held in his right hand and tail and making the knight retreat as his third thrust for her belly, "what so hard see stupid-breeder?" *Breeder?* ; reasonably sure she was being insulted Elspeth stepped into the attack, ignoring the knife that clattered off her greave in favour of sending the rodent catapulting away as blocking her gutting stroke lifted him off his feet,

"I am a knight of Bant," and she was; as long as a single noble heart beat for their codes Bant would forever be, one of the codes of the knighthood she had only recently been reminded of, "I do not allow others to die when I can prevent it." His whiskered face twisted in confusion before he sprang away, dancing on the tips of his blades to avoid the grass that had suddenly become a carpet of spikes,

"Maggots gnaw your eyes cloud-gaze," he squeaked aggressively, Kaguya regarding him impassively as streamers of mana from her good hand fed into the ground beneath them, the grass her and Elspeths' ally as he gaze took in the rest of the battle and found it mercifully going well.

Splay-Paw was as deadly a nezumi as any she'd heard of in legend or myth, holding a candle to even the mythical oni-slave of the ancient war but together she and the human were holding him and neither of his companions were doing as well as he was. Though Venser was weakened, barely visible to her sight, his friend and Tamiyo were driving their aggressor back; even if his armour soaked up most of the damage he had no protection against mystical restraints and his blades were broken, gently steaming under the touch of magmas' fury. Equally the other two were a blaze of fire and mist, pressing and pinning the Kor in place and preventing her from anything more than a desperate defence that must surely soon crack. Splay-Paw also seemed to realise this, rolling backwards to put some distance between him and his opponent before an explosion of smoke surrounded him,

"This way," Kaguya had been expecting this and rushed forwards to grab the humans' elbow, "he never stays around for a losing battle; we must press him before he can interfere with the others."

"Lead on," Elspeth knew the soratami saw more than she did and let herself be guided through the smoke, though on the other side little awaited but the sight of his tail, two other plumes of smoke already dissipating on the slight breeze as the three enemies converged on a single point, even Spikes moving faster than before despite the dents in his armour.

"This not working," they heard the nezumi shriek, "too busy not dying to kill. We go, find others."

"I agree," the blue woman, her race unknown to the knight, was dousing her scorched arm with a spray of water, her opponents thrown off by the sudden blinding cloud until a gust of wind blew it away and Chandra emerged, now fully aflame, "we can't win this."

"Back to the beginning, I will call the others," Spikes' voice was hard to pick out at this range, it volume never changing, "we will summon the aspect."

Aspect? ; whatever it was sounded like bad news, especially as the Kor stumbled in her run towards her allies. Whatever she might have wanted to say was lost under the glares of the others and she nodded,

"No," a ribbon of black and blue mana was flicked overhead like a whip, Kaguya guiding it but too late; as her spell streaked towards the assembled trio the smallest of them threw something overhead that exploded with a soft pop, casting them all into shadow. As the nezumi suddenly chanted those shadows deepened to utter blackness, the three sinking into it even as Elspeth's incantation of light and Chandra's ball of flame speared towards the dark, eating at the edges and banishing it to reveal nothing where the three had once been.

"Damn," Elspeth spat, looking around for their enemies and checking her friends were still able to fight, "where did…?"

Even as she voiced the question there was a sudden light in the distance, a flare of red; *a signal?* ;

"From the sea," Tamiyo's voice reached them, the soratami hurrying over with Koth in her wake, the Hammer tribe leader holding Venser in his arms, "but why give away their position?"

"They're calling for help," Elspeth explained quickly, "I heard them, they're aiming to summon something but they need the others."

"Then let's make sure they don't," Chandra cut in, "we've got them on the back foot, let's keep them there and find out what the hell they want with us."

"Hear, hear," Venser croaked weakly, half-sitting up, "Tamiyo-san, can you send out more maps as we run?"

"Of course," she already had a scroll unfurled, her calligraphy brush dancing in her hands, "let us go and see this to its end."

At those words and sharing a nod the seven planeswalkers took off towards the signal and, hopefully, the end-game with this mysterious foe.

Vraska heard the roar but didn't think of it as a warning and was too busy shaking off the effect of Mel's foot to the side of her head to make sense of Nissa's call until it was too late. She had enough time to catch a glimpse of madness before there was naught but agony, pain that eclipsed everything else as the woman who should have died under her cursing gaze plunged a knife to the hilt in her thigh. Her symbiotes came to her defence, sensing the wounding of their host and lashing out to protect her; the cultist merely cackled, the agony repeated as she ripped her blade out of the wound to dance out of reach of retribution. Closing her eyes in case the pain made

her engage her killing look reflexively Vraska felt herself falling, her blood cold beneath her fingers as her leg crumpled,

"Aha, the monster falls, I have slain her; well I have… oh, not yet," the newly-ascended planeswalker sensed another presence approaching though her heat-sense, one that drove her enemy away; certain she was in control the gorgon opened her eyes in time to see the mad cultist weaving away from Garruk, the life-mage with his teeth bared as his axe clove in deadly swings. *Defend yourself* ; the gorgon urged him mentally, gouging a handful of earth from the ground; *I'm just wounded, don't let rage leave you open* ; but she wasn't Jace, she couldn't talk into minds. The Wildspeaker didn't hear her, his blows wilder and more misguided and Exava pounced, leaping within range of his axe and embracing him as though they were lovers, her blade cutting a bloody gouge down his side. Her pointed teeth were bared in a grin which then faltered; Garruk was smiling as well and from the floor Vraska saw why.

His axe was falling, his hands were free and they were terrible instruments of destruction; one clamped onto the arm wounding him just as the other grabbed the cultist by her neck, crushing her windpipe and leaving her to kick uselessly as he ripped her away from him. Holding her at arms' length his muscles bulged, her face going as red as a goreberry and looking like it was about to burst, and it did; the gorgon forgot her pain as a jet of bright red blood sprayed into the beast-mages' face, slackening his grip for that crucial second and allowing the Rakdos to squirm free, blood dribbling from between her lips, a mutilated tongue the price of her freedom. She staggered away, heaving for air and clutching her throat just as Vraska felt impacts though the earth, footsteps; friend or foe? She rotated her head just in time to see the willowy silhouette, her symbiotes quelled before they did more than rear up at the elf who looked down at her,

"Where is it, your wound?"

"Leg," Vraska's voice was tight with pain, even as she channelled mana through the earth she'd pressed over the laceration to seal off

the wound it didn't stop the abominable ache. Nissa leapt over her, wide eyes widening as she saw blood oozing through the mud plaster,

"What are you doing, you'll poison it."

"It won't affect me as it would you."

"Magic can…"; *but I can't, I only know how to heal others of my tribe* ; never before had that been a problem, indeed it had been a source of pride but now all the shaman could feel was profound disquiet that she didn't know how to help; *how blind could I, could we be?* ;

"Nissa, Nissa," the gorgon's rasp broke her from her self-castigation and to her surprise there was understanding in those slit pupils, "it doesn't matter, that kind of magic doesn't work on my kind. Where is Mel?" Nissa shook her head, stomach churning with a mixture of loathing that her enemy had granted her mercy again and gratitude that she had,

"She saw what happened and, retreated; hold still, I'll make sure this plaster doesn't move." Vraska nodded, glancing away as the elf laid her hand atop her scaled one, her mana wending into the blood-dampened earth, solidifying it, moulding it to the cut and securing it in place. A root she had rise to the surface was quickly cut and tied in place, helping bind the wound as Nissa stood and stepped back, seeing Vraska look behind her and spinning with her stave ready; if the cultist had returned she'd soon be cackling in front of whatever dark god she worshipped.

There was no-one there, nothing save, in the distance, a faint red glow like a falling star; *a, what was the word - a firework? But there was no noise* ; she'd have heard such things before she saw them but this one hadn't exploded and there were no enemies around so she threw it from her mind, planting her spear in the ground and dropping to her knees beside the gorgon to feed more mana to the plaster,

"Do you think you can stand?" She saw the wounded leg shake, the inhuman face twitch and the multitude of symbiotes rustle restlessly as they shared their hosts' pain,

"No, I can barely move."

"Then stay still," the earth came to life under the elfs' feet and pulled itself into a platform that bore the gorgon aloft, "you picked me up once, now I repay the favour." Vraska said nothing, Nissa barely noticing her reaction until she felt the hand overlain by her own turn over, the two meeting palm to blood-slicked palm,

"There was no favour Nissa Revane, all are equal in the Swarm," the Golgari told her before smiling, "I am glad you didn't try to pick me up by the hair however; it would have ended badly for both of us."

Despite herself, despite all the fighting, the humiliation and the pain Nissa laughed, she honestly laughed as she squeezed the gorgons' fingers, Vraska also giving a hissing chuckle as she lay upon the elemental, safe for a while. They were still laughing when company rolled in, Garruk looking the two of them over curiously before deciding whatever was going on was none of his business, instead speaking as Gideon arrived at a run, sural looped over his shoulder and stopping at the sight of him,

"It's not mine," the Wildspeaker growled, remembering the wicked woman who'd writhed from his grip after using a defence he'd never seen before; had she not been an enemy he would have been grudgingly respected her will to survive, "she ran at the red light after another called her to heel."

"So did mine, that signal was planned," the hieromancer deduced grimly before looking past the recovering ones, "I'll get Kiora; can you follow them?" Garruk's smile was made terrifying by a mask of drying blood,

"I'll have that bitches' knife for a hunt-trophy." *Just be grateful she didn't get the trophy Timothy said she wanted* ; fortunately the sun

mage kept that thought quiet as he ran towards the bubble he could see, glad Kiora had kept her head enough to remember her spell and, more than that, her charge as well. Defending the helpless, if not innocent; gods pride was going to choke him if he wasn't careful as he caught the mergirls' outline and made a pre-arranged signal. The thin sheen of mana-charged water quickly collapsed, the mergirl spattered with droplets as she quickly ran up and glanced over him concerned,

"Are you hurt?"

"No," he assured her, hiding the bruises he'd received from the edges of Tims' skillet, "are you all right? Why did you need the bubble?"

"The other one, Mel, she, er, she asked to see it."

"Really?" *Why would people like her and Timothy, Jhon'ee too to a lesser extent, work with a madwoman? It doesn't make sense* ; he'd asked that question to his opponent but the old man had been infuriating cryptic, rambling about other topics and old adventures to frustrate his impromptu investigations, "She didn't attack you though?"

"No, not really; I bubbled both of us and she, no, us," Kiora suddenly straightened as she remembered what was missing, "Liliana," Gideon followed her towards where the woman sat, dampened by the water but not caring as she stared over her knees, "Liliana come on, Gideon can help with your binding."

The necromancer said nothing and showed no reaction other than to stand; as soon as he saw her face Gideon realised no amount of bindings on his behalf was going to restore what she'd lost; *her debts paid in full then* . He'd heard of those who bartered away their most precious possession and lived to regret it but had never seen it until he looked into her face and saw nothing there but cold, cruel beauty. She lived devoid of anything that made life worth living and, worse than even that, she remembered life before her loss, a

punishment worse than any penance. *Those who think order cruel have never seen the punishments of true chaos* ; the old lesson, no longer as true in his mind as it once had been, echoed in his mind as the necromancer brittly walked towards him, not dropping her desolating gaze from his face as he tried to remain impassive; *we might end your life, but we do not touch your soul* ;

"Don't pity me," her voice was flatter than before but there was still a trace of bitterness, placed there by the memory of the emotion as opposed to feeling it, "I am, what I am but I will not be pitied for it."

"Fine," Gideon would once have either castigated or tried to redeem her; time had taught him he couldn't save one who refused the open hand, "you made your deals, you pay the price for them. Our enemies have retreated for a signal, we're going after them - are you with us or do we leave you here?" If her loss had one positive it was that it made her harder to read; he honestly had no idea what she was about to do or say until she stooped down and he heard fabric rip,

"I can run," she assured him, the ragged slit now torn in her dress letting her stretch her legs, "leave the old man alive, I want this curse undone." Given what he knew of the esoteric spell the older man had caught her with Gideon thought that unlikely but also thought better of voicing it aloud - hope might be the only thing keeping her together and dashing it could be disastrous, especially if she undid the binding that locked away the power she couldn't control,

"Keep up then; Kiora," he didn't need to finish, the girl leapt into his opened arms knowing she wouldn't be able to keep up otherwise, holding still as he led Liliana towards the others, Garruk already ranging ahead to track down their fleeing foes, the elf having to move more slowly as she commanded the elemental holding Vraska; *actually* ;

"Kiora I'm going to leave you with Vraska, she's hurt; can you look after her like you did Liliana?"

"Of course, love to," the mergirl said before whispering, "at least she'll talk to me, she just talked a lot and then went quiet, didn't say a word. What happened to her?"

"I'm not sure," he hated lying but this really was the lesser of two evils, "we'll deal with it later, when this is done. Revane," the elf looked over her shoulder at his shout, "room for one more?"

"Should be," she called back, seeing the passenger he was carrying and fortifying the moving turf with more of her mana, expanding it to give Kiora somewhere to sit that wouldn't jostle the prone gorgon, "I'll have to hang back a little but we shouldn't slow you down too much."

"We'll keep close," the hieromancer assured her before he saw Garruk hold his axe aloft, something settling on its haft and causing him to stop; at first he thought it might have been a bird though when he arrived to see the Wildspeaker unfold it, he realised it was something better,

"Where?"

"Their enemies have run too, they must be uniting as one pack," the hunter spat at the thought, "so must we; three are dangerous, six too many for us with wounded and small-claw."

"You're not wrong," Gideon assured him, "we follow the light and either find the others or find those who've done this." Garruk nodded, eyes already fixed on the distance, towards the shore he could smell and hear but not see,

"Follow me."

"I see them," the call brought the rough group to a standstill, Kaguyas' veins engorged as she double-checked what her changed vision was telling her, "five, that way."

"The others," Jace put the pieces together first; *it couldn't be the rat and the others, three of them left together and his shadow magic must take them all to the same place* ; "they must have seen the signal too," his heart suddenly clenched tightly, "there should be six."

"My vision is not perfect," the soratami said, seeming to glide across the ground rather than run as she plotted an intercept course, "it could be that two are close together and I cannot tell them apart."

"We best find out, we're going to need all the help we can get," Chandra pointed out, keeping up with their tracker as Kaguya's blessed vision led the way, fingers tightly crossed that everyone was all right but especially Vraska, Gideon and little Kiora, "how far away are we?"

"Minutes only." A crane of paper flew overhead, streaking into the distance as Tamiyo wrote on the run, the simulacrum zipping into the distance to guide the other planeswalkers in and, mercifully, it worked; there was no mistaking the huge silhouette that appeared on the horizon and raised his axe in greeting,

"Never thought I'd be so glad to see a dustmage," Venser admitted in an undertone, Koth managing to control his laughter by the time they were close enough to see the Wildspeaker properly, Garruk looking over them all before addressing the closest,

"Any hurt?"

"Just one, exhausted," Tamiyo assured him, the paper bird that had guided Garruk to them flying to her finger, its purpose complete, "yourselves?"

"One, the gorgon woman; not bad," he said, discounting his own wounds and hearing both Ravnican planeswalkers catch their breath, "just can't walk, the mad woman stabbed her." Chandra's eyes flashed,

"That bitch burns today!"

"Not if I get there first," Jace's fury was colder than his friends but no less powerful for that, "how far are they Garruk?"

"Come," he beckoned them, his long, loping stride eating up the ground, bringing them quickly within eyeshot of the others. The relief was palpable from all sides; though strangers to each other, in this place and against these enemies they had a common cause and every friendly face was a welcome one. As they took stock and shared information about their enemies, Chandra skirted around the throng towards the rear, peering up onto the shuffling living land and sighing dramatically,

"Carted around, being waited on hand and foot by a personal servant; some people get all the luck," quickly dodging a spray of water from her friends' new protector and thanking the mergirl for looking after her the pyromancer quickly dropped the jokes as she saw the mud tied around the gorgon's leg, "how are you feeling - I'm going to kill Exava if it helps." Vraska smiled, propping herself up on her elbows,

"Surprisingly it does; it should heal quickly given enough rest and food, I reckon no more than a few days before I am whole, tomorrow before I can move. I am, however," she paused, searching for the right word, "discomforted; have you tried to sense a way away from this place Chandra?" Having never been one to run from a fight the question caught her off-guard,

"Uh, no; we can't run away Vraska; these bastards have a lot to answer for, you least of all."

"You are correct, we can't run away but not for the reason you stated," the gorgon was solemn as she regarded her friend, "I have tried to sense another plane near here since I was placed on this elemental as has Kiora - neither of us can feel anything beyond the Eternities," the mergirl nodded to back up her new friends' words, looking pensive as Vraska finished, "I am hoping it is because neither of us are experienced planeswalkers but…"

"You think we're what, trapped here?" The thought made even Chandra's blood run cold; she'd been held on a plane against her will before and it had not been a pleasant experience,

"I hope not but fear so," Vraska said quietly, not wanting the others to overhear her private concerns, "and if I'm right we may be fighting these planeswalkers for a lot more than merely wounded pride."

"Then let's hope you're not right; keep that idea to yourself, I'll ask Jace when I get a chance, he's better at entering the Eternities than me," Chandra assured her before hearing someone approach and backing away as the ground under her boots shifted, "what…?"

"Got to put him somewhere," Koth told her, helping Venser onto the now-enlarged elemental as Nissa stood nearby, maintaining her creation with only the merest hint of effort, "first the cloudfolk now the gorgon; you really do get all the luck."

"Ah but is it luck or long experience; watch," the sojourner said mystically, half-rolling to see his new bedfellow regarding him, "it's Vraska is it not? Beautiful name, and if I may be so bold your scales have exquisite patterning…"

"I'm flattered but it's a wasted effort; I bite to reproduce."

"You're not the first girl to tell me that," Chandra clapped a hand over her mouth, shaking with mirth; *he didn't even blink - I have got to get a copy of whatever book he's in, something about rabbits?* ; "but I'm sure we can work something out…" Metal hands met a partially metal face as Koth groaned,

"This is not the time and there are flecks present; concentrate on being ready to teleport, not flirt."

"My dear Koth why do you think I developed that ability - why sneak out the boudoir when you can flash out?"

"You are hopeless, led by your balls."

"And you gave yours to Nurthu when you compounded," the artificer riposted, Chandra forced to turn her back as the two bickered, "now go, let me enjoy my recovery."

"Please don't leave," Vraska's deadpan again drew a helpless snicker as the firebrand stepped away, waving to Kiora and grateful after seeing Nissa nod at her whisper to stay close in case things went badly before she fell into step with Koth,

"So, Venser; he seems…"

"He's a sarcastic bit of slag who torments me every chance he gets," the geomancer grumbled, "the things he said at my melding ceremony; I should have made that mask tighter!"

"Mask - later," she decided, tapping him on the shoulder, "when this is over you'll have to tell me everything." The Hammer tribe leader glanced at her sidelong before nodding,

"Likewise, so le…"

He was cut off by not so much a noise as a sensation, a rush of mana from the earth so powerful it affected them all. Aches faded and wounds, even deep ones, became a little less painful and Nissa's elemental swelled a little in size much to the consternation of those atop it,

"The aspect," Elspeth called over the stunned confusion, "our enemy said they were summoning something, the aspect. We have to stop them!"

"How so fast? Our three weren't that far ahead of us when they ran."

"Translocation magic," Jace answered Gideon's question, pelting to keep pace as they ran towards the source of the mana pulse, "I'm beginning to think all of them are skilled in it. They must have regrouped already and begun summoning this… aspect."

"Then let's go unsummon it," Koth grated, punching his fists together as he recalled finally gaining the upper hand against the dark warrior before the smoke had let him escape, "and then we put its summoners to the damned torch!"

The assent to this question as mutual, each of the assembled mages gathering their strength, their mana and their wits for a last confrontation against their mysterious antagonists.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 - Beyond Magic

They were not prepared for this.

Their enemies were united with their backs to the sea and something else, something truly monstrous loomed behind them all. Each planewalker stumbled as they arrived, attention dragged towards the terrible effigy raised by their enemies, an emerald skeleton that towered over them all encasing their opponents in its ribcage as its arms swept out, threatening any who came close. All six were there; the old man, the rat, the Kor, the cultist, the girl and the knight of darkness; within the protection of this terrible monstrosity; words failed, none had seen the pure mana of life take this form before. Only when a sheet of flame roared and splashed over the terrible construct did most of the assembled remember themselves,

"Green mana burns, or rots," Chandra called, stepping away from the others slightly to fully catch light, "make yourself useful witch." Eyes turned to Liliana and narrowed as she shook her head,

"I can't, I have no mana," that was a lie, she did but she could not call upon it without dying; *though am I even living now?* ; "the old man stripped it from me."

"Then stand back," the dismissal should had made her furious; she was not some possession to be protected by others, she fought her own battles but anger, along with spite, hope and everything else had been lost so she meekly did as she was bid, merely watching as the others gathered themselves and began to attack. She was left with her thoughts, memories of a life no longer her own as she trudged towards the where the injured and useless lay, remembering the shame she should have been feeling as fire, mist and the earth itself descended upon their varied enemies. The verdant skeleton shook, bones cracking under the assault and one of those protected

by it fell to an armoured knee as the strain told before forcing himself upright, a black blade questing forwards and caressing the cheek of one stood next to him as the deadly knights' voice cut through the din,

"Blood flows…"

Even through the battle and at this distance Chandra would have sworn Exava shuddered as blood dribbled from the cut, then the cultist stiffened, arms akimbo as though crucified as she felt mana, mana she was attuned to, rising from the earth,

"No," Koth was there, his veins and metal glowing as he tried to divert some of the upwelling, Chandra seizing her chance to end this battle before it got out of hand,

"Give it to me Koth!" She didn't know if he heard her call until the pure red mana hit her, the thunderous wrath of the mountains and the fire they contained lighting every iota of her being, every strand of her hair; she couldn't contain this fury, she could only give it a direction. With a scream somewhere between loathing and triumph she unleashed it, a fire with no colour streaming towards their enemy, so bright that even through her goggles she couldn't look at it. It would have turned a dragon to cinders and it cut through the crimson aura now flickering around the thing to impact on the green skeleton again, the bones charring black as the pyromaster forced everything she had into the breach, every drop of mana she could wring from the earth and Koth's siphoning returned to their enemies redoubled. She was hardly aware of falling until her hands caught the floor, the scent of smouldering grass in her nose as she panted, exhausted, her armour almost melting off her body before a chilling wind washed over her and she drank in its merciful cold,

"Thanks Jace," she didn't need to look who was cooling her down, "wow; that was the biggest boom I've ever made."

"Well don't make it again," the mind-mage said half-seriously, glad to see she was mostly unharmed after that conflagration and not stopping the small storm that was dulling the cherry-red glow from her mail, "I'm not sure my heart or your clothes could take it, and unlike my caricature I'm not lending you my cloak if you lose them Miss Nailer." She snorted,

"You denouement-reader!"

"Says the woman who read it over my shoulder," Jace teased, helping her back to her feet when she was cool enough to touch, "can you stand?"

"I"; *why risk it?* ; "give me a minute, the worlds' tilting." Jace nodded, slipping his arm around her shoulders to steady her and she knew contentment; they'd won, she'd caused an explosion better than anything she'd done before and the Ravnican was sharing in her triumph, what could possibly…?

"Better get that tilt fixed quick," another voice broke in, shattering her wonderful illusion and she glared at the woman responsible, though as she followed Elspeths' eyes her triumph was dashed even further, "we're not through this."

"No way; that would have slagged even that darksteel-stuff," but her protests were in vain; the sternum of the ribcage was now black, scorched beyond repair but still it stood defiant, those within still protected despite her furious heat as the red mana hazed over the green construct. Even as she shook her head and realised the clouds overhead were raining, the two soratami looking to extinguish the prickling aura, a now familiar voice sent another chill through them all,

."..Shadow rises…"

Grateful they were close to the ocean Tamiyo pulled more moisture down from the clouds, looking to smother the flickering redness

around that monster. She could barely see those who dwelt within, a series of vague smears through the curtains of red and green but her eyes had been drawn to one of them, the one closest to them and her personal nemesis. Splay-Paw had been sat cross-legged, head down as though he were a monk at prayer; *or communing with oni* ; the thought made the moonfolk both detest and fear the nezumi assassin more but as his head rose at the knights' colourless command and she saw something every historian of Kamigawa knew her fear soon outweighed the detestation,

"The *Inkuaizu*," she gasped, watching with horror as the wisps of darkness boiling from the nezumi's eyes began lacing through the red mana hue, covering the bones with muscles of darkness, "be careful everyone, he summons the strength of oni against us."

"What are oni?"

"Demons," Kaguya answered for the Moon Sage, her visage grim, "Splay-Paw channels the mana of death and decay; it is strengthening that, aspect."

"Mountain, swamp and forest; that's madness," Koth declared, watching as the writhing dark smothered the forms of their enemies, hidden by the blackness within their terrible creation, "how can…?"

"Never mind how," Gideon cut down the questions as he faced the monster, now a terrible torso of black with the only bale glowing of its eyes showing the fires within, "there's no darkness light can't banish. With your help my lady?"

"With pleasure," Elspeth sank to a knee, her blade before her and lips moving in a silent prayer as the hieromancer likewise summoned his mana, the sural lashing the air and leaving glowing contours from the strength of the plains. Everyone stepped back, giving the sun mages room and unable to look as the light around them began to shine, its radiance set against the foulness the nezumi had belched into being. None could see how the struggle was going, none save one who turned her back and channelled mana of her own, at first

glad to see the darkness being smothered by the light, then fearful as she looked closer,

"Stop, stop," Kaguya forced herself to shout over her fear, "it, it is not working! Your light is, protecting it somehow!" The soratami's call couldn't penetrate the meditative trances of the light mages but fortunately her mana could, the thread of blue mana she wended into their spells enough to catch their attention and cause their chants to stop. As the illumination faded she pointed to their opponent, the sight of it stilling the glares sent her way; patches of light were clinging to the shadowed body and they were growing, spreading over it like,

"Armour," Elspeth's voice was dry, "armour of light over darkness. What is this thing?"

."..Death wakes…"

Spikes' voice was as bland as ever but his timing spoke of mockery, mockery answered with a snap of leather and metal over flesh,

"Garruk no."

"It is armour," the beastmage rumbled, his metal guard covering all save his now glowing eyes, the fury of the savage he was at heart filling him, "and I have not met a shell I couldn't break."

"Together then?" Elspeth stepped forwards but the Wildspeaker shook his head,

"One strong beast is better than a pack here; stay clear." Before any could say more he was gone, his strength and mana around him in a green hue, melding with him, changing him and the battle-roar that issued from his helm. Hearts in mouths they watched his charge, the beastmage surrendering fully to his instincts and fury, consuming the distance between himself and his prey in moments as the change took effect. None knew the beast he truly became but whatever it

was all were grateful they'd not seen it before, the creature as huge as the now-armoured construct that raised an arm to ward off the titanic axe falling towards it.

No shell he couldn't break ; though connected to green mana herself Nissa was left humbled as the human, a supposed lesser being, shattered the white protection about the glowing figures' arm, the edge of his blade smashing through light and darkness together. She thought she could hear a faint, keening scream as though the evil thing was in pain, over and over as the giant creature that had once been the Wildspeaker sent a volley of blows into his stationary opponent. The being of mana blocked as it could, weathering the worst of the damage on its arms but more than one colossal punch or strike took it in the ribs or helm, splinters of protective white mana flashing wherever the axe bit home, the weaknesses then attacked by; *… the others! What am I doing watching?* ; cursing herself for being caught by the spectacle as the beasts' savage assault was reinforced by flying earth and the power of flame and storm she seized control of the earth under their enemies, forcing the land itself to attack. It felt as though her mana was striking a steel shield at the base of whatever this thing was but as long as it kept its attention she was doing something other than standing watching. Again and again she kept up the attack until a noise from behind her forced her to split her concentration then break off in alarm,

"What are you doing? Stay back, you can't…"

"I can with help," Vraska told her, one arm around Vensers' shoulder and her other hand atop Kiora's head, the mergirl an impromptu crutch as the trio limped forwards, "we will all fight here; can you channel the mana of the swamps?"

"I ah," none of her current tribe knew the experiments that had seen her banished from her first but this was hardly the time to be reticent, "I can."

"Together then; Kiora help me down please."

"Fine, gently," with the artificers' aid she helped the gorgon sit, Vraska's symbiotes already twitching to gather the faint echoes of midnight mana, "let's drown those bastards - uh," she looked around, blew out a relieved breath and looked around guiltily as she reached into the soil and the water it contained, "don't tell father I said that, he hates me swearing."

"Father? Oh," following her gaze Venser smiled gently, sitting down himself and grateful for the rest he'd had atop the elemental - it took the edge off his pain, enough that he could focus and lend what aid he could, "not a word. Hey," seeing another figure still hanging back the venerable planeswalker felt his ire rise, "are you going to help or not?"

"Venser," Kiora hissed, "she doesn't have mana; one of them did something to her."

"Oh, sorry," the artificer offered, wondering if there was some way he could relocate the whole thing to somewhere far, far away; *like the sun, assuming Garruk leaves anything of it to shift* ; "oh, nice swamp the two of you," he complimented, seeing the ground at the base of the monster start to liquefy to sludge, sucking it down while keeping Garruk, now bolstered with blessing from Elspeth and Gideon to protect him from harm as his enemy tried to wrestle his terrible animal form. The murk might drown the damned thing if they were fortunate, something he could help with,

"Fishy," the nickname got him a swat to the arm but she listened, having had a little time to know the artificer on their conjoined ride, "we can help that, focus on the water in the muck, do you think you can tap into it this far away?"

"There's no shore a wave can't reach; I'll roll over to… wait, don't touch it," she said suddenly, springing off the ground as though she'd sat on an ants' nest, "the water, it's being dragged in, I'm not channelling it."

"Dragged in… oh no," a terrible suspicion filled the sojourners' mind; *the only colour it doesn't have* ; "Jace," luckily the Ravnicans' clothes made him easy to pick out and Venser stood, fighting down dizziness as his shout preceded him, "tell Garruk to get back - it's summoning the sea!"

Jace heard the call and split his concentration; as he focussed the mana of water into his eyes and saw with perception even an elf or eagle would have lacked he simultaneously reached out to touch the mind of the bestial caster. It was not easy, Garruks' transformation had enhanced his psyche as much as his body; he had to fight through waves of bestial aggression to reach the higher functions the beastmage had subsumed. It was like peeling an onion and even more unpleasant as the rage of a predator at the moment of a kill savaged his probe but, as with Elspeth, he persevered to ensure the safety of another. In his wrath Garruk could not see the small trickles of blue mana being drawn up the armour of his enemy, mana that was the enemy of his own and could likely be his doom; Jace could see the gathering strength, some of it dashed as the Wildspeakers' blows bit home but not enough. As it coalesced around the belt and one arm of the creature Jace reached his goal, speaking to the lifemage just as someone else, someone hated spoke to them all,

."..War calls…"

The beast that Garruk was leapt back just in time and Jace was relieved; had he been a little later, just a few more seconds it would likely have meant the end. The white-armoured figure was now armed, a solid shield of blue mana formed over its left arm as the right dropped to the bottle or gourd at its left, ignoring the titanic claw that shrived into its helm, going for the eyes. The blade that sprang from the container was colourless, completely see-through and seemed to cut the very air, missing Garruks' avatar by a whisker as it paced backwards, unsure of this new and deadly evolution,

"Get back," the others quickly took up Gideons' call, the hieromancer regarding their enemy and shaking his head as he fought down fear

to think tactically; *little chance we can beat that thing as we are, we need a plan or to get the hell out of here* ; "Garruk fall back, none of us can take it alone."

Despite his experiences with several beasts of war, those of Zendikar not least amongst them, he would have been lying to say a quiver didn't run through him when the changed man turned and regarded him with a venomous snarl. He met its burning gaze as unflinchingly as he could and to his relief it did bound away from its now deadly prey, the mana form watching it leave with those pitiless crimson eyes. The Wildspeaker let go of his strength as he retreated, as close to a man as he could be with his axe notched on the things' armour, sweat flooding in rivulets down his back as he faced the thing unbowed,

"Powerful beast," he spat, looking over at them all, "even as a pack we'd not pull it down."

"No we'd not," Elspeth agreed, looking over their tired ranks and realising whatever this thing was it did have one weakness left, "we have to get away and strategise, we can…"

."..Doom comes."

The last weakness was ending at the black knights' command, the planeswalkers watching in horror as the aspect began to rise, an armoured waist, then hips, then thighs emerging underneath it as it set its gaze upon them. Thoughts of victory turned to ash, this titan was unstoppable; even incomplete it had shrugged off all they could throw at it and now, as it rose to claim them all, a sense of finality settled over them,

"If you've got a god start praying," Venser was first to speak, determined that if this was his end he'd end it with a quip rather than a snarl, "if you haven't pick one quick." There were a smattering of laughs at this and several glances were swapped but the first answer came from a voice no-one, least of all those who knew the speaker, recognised at first,

"No need to pray," the artificer watched the woman step past where he sat, the ragged hole torn in her dress giving him a glimpse of milky leg; *oh, the flesh might be old but the spirit would give it a damned good go* ; "I have your miracle; Jace, to me."

Despite their rocky history the situation was dire, this thing was beyond anything he'd seen or read about before and any voice, even one sworn to darkness, with an idea was one he had to heed. Shelving his misgivings the Ravnican made his way towards the necromancer, pausing only at footsteps behind him and seeing Chandra in his shadow as he looked back. She said nothing, merely nodded and he could only hope she realised his return nod told her how grateful he was for her support before reaching his former flame, trying to keep the contempt from his tone as he spoke,

"What is it?"

"I have a memory of reading an account; I need you to put it foremost in my mind and then give it to everyone else here," even considering their poor history Jace looked up at Liliana's tone; *she sounds… beaten? But that's not right, she's never…* ; as he finally took in her face he realised she didn't just sound defeated. Looking into the violent orbs that had once bewitched him was like seeing through a window, nothing behind them save, maybe, a vague sense of loss that was realised but couldn't quite be explained. Realising they had little time the mind-mage complied, a pulse of mana coring into her mind and seeing…

… *old parchment, very old, she had to be careful with it or it would crumble to dust, the last of its kind. Drafted after the invasion of Dominaria, it detailed an action she'd heard of recently but not paid any credence to until one of her sources had assured her this scroll was real. A raid upon one of the Phyrexian camps turned into an ambush which was itself thwarted and became one of the most decisive Dominarian victories in that bloodstained campaign, and this was the account of a survivor who had seen the spell that cast it and spoken to the one who had. With this power she could become more than she was now, much more - she could find that Raven Man*

and pluck out his eyes, trap him in his own snare as he had orchestrated her banishment. Pushing the candle close, she bent down to ready the dusty text.

She read and as she did her ire rose; useless, this was entirely useless! So all the casters in the raiding party had pooled their mana into one of their number who had unleashed a blast that destroyed the camp and left them unharmed - how? The scroll said nothing of how to cast the spell, just that the caster had mentioned that the overflow of mana had allowed her to see some sort of truth, and the truth had saved them. Cursing herself for wasting time with this nonsense she skimmed the rest of the passage about how the types of mana could be controlled and then blew the candle out, leaving it where it was and finding her way out through the darkness, no light needed to guide her way…

… back in his own mind Jace shook his head, regarding his one-time lover with shock,

"That's your plan? A spell, if it even is a spell - you've gone mad."

"You have a better idea?" It was a question, no more no less and that made him double-take; she wasn't being sarcastic, "Give them all the memory, and be quick; we don't have time to argue." She was right about that much at least, the aspect was on its knees and more was being added all the time; against his better judgement Jace beckoned the rest in and prepared himself,

"Everyone get close, make your minds as calm as possible."

"With that thing coming - you are not asking for much are you?" Tamiyo's humour was dry but the soratami nodded as did the others, Jace steeling himself as he had once before and opening himself up to the psyches he could feel around him. It was hellish, an ungodly weight on his mind as bad as it had been at the Mazes' End but without the help of the Judge; his one saving grace was that the minds he peered into were mostly united in purpose but even so his vision tunnelled, the world greyed out and when it returned he found

Chandra holding him up this time, the firebrand regarding him with concern,

"You all right?" He could only nod and even that made his head throb,

"I think so, enough to - hey," he called weakly, "where are you going?"

"You've all seen what I'm going to do," Liliana called back, not slowing her pace towards the monster now almost free of the earth, "either give me your mana or get away from me."

"No," with a rattle of armour Elspeth stood before her, facing her down, "even if you could channel all… what have you *done* ?" The horror in the knights' tone as she saw the necromancers' visage was only magnified as Liliana answered, emptiness in her once-fulsome voice,

"I was a planeswalker when the sparks burned bright; I remember what it was to be a goddess. I have cast enchantments and channelled mana you can only dream of; I am the only one here who has even a chance of repeating that history. And if I don't," she faced the knight directly before shrugging and moving past her, "it's one less necromancer in the Multiverse. Make your choice everyone, and hero," she said aloud, reaching for something about her neck as her soulless gaze sought out the other sun mage present, "I was never good at following rules."

Liliana's last sight was of his expression dropping, his denial on his lips and then clay crumbled under her fingers, the binding was broken and all that she had been promised came flooding to her, a wave she could prepare for and put to a decent purpose.

As the hungry darkness erupted once more all were stilled, minds torn between the suffering planeswalker, the apparition of death

taking its first dreadful pace towards to them and the memory the mind-mage had given them. Only at a sudden shout of,

"Not again," was the spell broken, a small stream of blue mana being brought the surface as Kiora reacted, though without the mana Garruk had raised to break down she was unable to help as she had before. The sudden sight of the little rivulets being consumed by the shadows brought the others to their senses, though there was still a small pause before Koth snorted,

"Woman's a fool but a brave one," and he reached up, remembering the mountains of his distant home and feeling their strength rise from the earth, adding to that of the mergirl as Garruk snarled, his fist punching through the topsoil to augment the small-claws' efforts.

"Wait, what… ah to hell with it," Chandra decided, her fire singeing the darkness, "better to flare out than gutter. Jace, you in this or you leaving it to me as usual?"

"You're insane but," his eyes glowed just as they found the firebrands' goggles, "I suppose that's part of your limited charm."

"Remind me to set you on fire later."

"Love off the battlefield," Elspeth called, smiling slightly as her sword was planted in the earth and the power of the plains rose through her devotion and Gideons' psalms, "Venser if this doesn't work get as many as you can out of here."

"How exactly," he muttered, mustering what feeble flickers of power he could from the sea and the sun as Vraska by the side of him did the same from swamp and forest, their supposed guardian already with her forehead almost on the floor as fatigue caught up with the mergirl, "oh well, at least if it we fail we'll be too out of it to feel anything. My dear if the worst should happen would you grant me a last request…?"

"I'll bite you; the venom works quickly," the gorgon assured him, voice strained even as she smiled a little; the sojourner's jests were far removed from the scorn she was used to and she wasn't unappreciative of his wit, "Nissa, however, may offer you more." The elf shuddered,

"As if incentive was needed for this to succeed," she declared, wringing every drop of power she could from the land and grateful for the others who were playing their parts, gentle rain falling as the clouds heeded the commands of their daughters, Kaguya and Tamiyo both praying to their ancestors and calling their strength to this last, desperate strategy.

Together, united for the first time by desperation, twelve planeswalkers gave their mana, their hope and their all to another of their number, their lives or deaths depending on if she could repeat a miracle she had only before seen in a second-hand account.

The pain had torn into her, the caustic mana of utter darkness rotting her from within as it had before; the loss of all emotion, torn from as the due of four demons, didn't extend to losing the capacity to feel agony. She bore it, she knew pain and refused to yield, remembering with unfettered clarity every technique she knew to control the mana of the swamps, most caustic and dangerous of all to control. Enduring for an instant Liliana Vess was relieved as she had been before when the other mana came, that of the plains and forests, of the distant mountains and nearby ocean. She gathered them to her, remembering the scroll Jace had pushed to the forefront of her mind and tried to see, to understand what it was trying to say, to make these disparate pieces fit together and undo the doom bearing down upon them all.

If she couldn't defeat this aspect and the old man escaped, with him went her only chance of breaking the curse she was suffering and without that faint hope, what else was left for her?

It was coming closer and nothing was happening to stop it.

Not that they could do much to stop it anyway, they'd proved that before now; the aspect, whatever it was, seemed impervious to mana before it was whole and, now it was, it stepped closer, the doom its creator had promised looming in its wake. None of the assembled broke off from their channelling, each one of them straining and swearing, pouring power into the void despite seeing nothing back - they could have broken off and never looked back and several of them considered it only to forego that route. They had started this together they would end it that way, the mood summed up by the youngest of their number as Kiora somehow dredged up the strength to yell,

"No-one stops; if you do you'll have to live with being beaten by a girl."

"That's low," Koth managed to grate, on his knees as the far mountains channelled their red mana onto him, "right, to the ego."

"Don't make, me laugh," Elspeth warned him, smiling despite herself, "can you, get away?"

"Wouldn't even try," the Vulshok gasped, regarding his friend severely, "you and, Venser never left anyone, behind."

"We've no wife, or children."

"You've my, compound, and Tiszta and, Melira," he cut down her argument, "I couldn't, face them knowing I, left you." Elspeth squeezed her eyes closed, reminded of the choice she had made, had no choice but to make; *I can't die with that on my conscience* ;

"Koth," she managed to shift just enough to regard him, cramping up from kneeling so long but not dropping the flow of mana into Liliana's form, now a maelstrom of the five colours, "Jace made me, choose what to do, with Tiz. I faced her, knowing what the bastard, told us; I

wanted to, kill her but couldn't, could never hurt her. I'm sorry, I will…"

Her attempt to make amends was cut off, undone by a sudden brightness before them, a colour defying all others ripped into being and tearing their strength from them all, a ferocious drain of mana so intense it cost them all they had and more, all twelve left barely conscious and only just able to see the results of their sacrifice.

Lilianas' loss was their ultimate salvation.

The irony was lost on her but the facts behind it were not; had her four debtors not taken their tolls she would likely have given in to panic in the heart at the maelstrom nexus. None of the mantras she knew would let her control the disparate mana, so much and so many colours she could not contain it, so she did not try. Rather than trying to impress her will Liliana stopped struggling, letting it flow as it would and seeing the pattern the force of creation played about her. She watched it collide, writhe, twirl and interact, filling her eyes and mind as she stepped forwards until she pressed against something, a threshold, almost a barrier in her mind; she could not take the last step along this strange path. It was like being lost in the Eternities, a fate all her kind feared but she, cursed by her own greed and the bargains she'd made to cling to her power, felt fear no longer and thus she thought of this problem, her mind unclouded and filled with this conundrum, a momentary lapse from the loss that consumed all else.

It cannot be the mana ; it twisted, writhed just before her but she couldn't go to it; *I'm not trying to control it, it's free. So if I'm not making it come to me, what is holding me back from following it - wait, me. It is like the Eternities* ; she had been a 'walker of the Multiverse for so long she barely remembered how difficult it had once been to breach the barrier between realities; *but if this is the same… let go* . She felt no fear, she felt nothing at all; she knew not what would happen if she followed the mana, it could consume her whole, destroy her utterly but she was already bereft of her most vital

essence; was destruction of her physical being such a terrible thing? *No, it's not* ; she felt herself drift, the barrier before her thinning as she accepted this truth; *like stepping through the planes. This could be the last one I ever see* ; and it would be a fine one - nearly two-hundred and fifty years old; gods she was tired, the chains of her age grown only heavier from her emotionless recollections of them; *if it is, I am ready.*

Liliana couldn't even remember what regret was as figments of her past drifted in her mind; her brother, father, the many she'd manipulated for her own ends over the years, her demon patriarchs no doubt gloating over their spoils, all flashed before her and she felt naught for them. Instead, liberated from her basic survival instinct she allowed herself to pass through the final barrier and into the mana beyond and in doing so, in taking that last step, she saw what only two others in the Multiverse had seen before her.

She existed and she did not exist, a concept in this realm of possibilities; time was immaterial, she remained long enough to know the truth but she could never understand it, understanding was beyond her, beyond anything or anyone. Within this timeless place she learned what she needed to know, the memory of her task the one constant that loomed before her, the reason she had risked all in this and when she was ready, when the mana had shown her what was needed for her task she returned to the physical world and its pain but a pain she understood - life, and the mana that fuelled life, was painful sometimes, that was part of the truth. In the heart of the storm, a seething cauldron of mana she saw before her, the doom summoned to face them and she remembered how it had been created. Knowing this and reaching out to the mana around her, she directed it all at the abomination with her certainty unshakeable…

Green mana was energy, growth, life itself; life could never be stopped and that was the truth, so the shield and sword of blue mana it carried were shattered.

Red mana was destruction, chaos and change; nothing could be eternal and that was the truth, so the armour of white mana the thing

wore was rusted away.

White mana was justice, order, the light itself; darkness and shadows could not exist in the light and that was the truth, so the ebon muscles of the being were boiled to nothingness.

Blue mana was innovation, inspiration and will; there was no chaos beyond understanding and that was the truth, so its crimson flesh was effervesced out of existence.

Black mana was entropy, corruption and death; no being could live forever and that was the truth, so the verdant bones of the spectre were withered to dust.

All happened within the blink of an eye, the aspect undone in the space between heartbeats, destroyed and reduced to a plume of mana of all colours that drifted away. Liliana stood before what had been unstoppable, unconquerable and twelve planeswalkers were in her eternal debt. It was a triumph she would never equal, a victory she would never know again…

… and she couldn't feel anything to celebrate it.

The faint sensation of grass on his cheek was all that kept Gideon awake until a sudden memory burst into his mind and he pushed past the pain, past the sickness and made it to his knees, his voice a croak,

"Kiora," he had to know if she was all right, "Kiora; damn it talk to me or I swear I'll disown you!"

"She's here," the rasping cry replaced some of her desperation with relief, making him shuffle forwards on his knees towards the gorgon, "my symbiotes feel her, she's alive."

"Ohh I wish I wasn't," Koth wasn't even trying to move, "I feel like the Oxidda mountains fell on me, one after the other."

"Just like your melding night then?" Pure embarrassment let the Vulshok turn his head to see Elspeth on her side, facing him with an exhausted smile, "Nurthu told me."

"Don't tell Venser," he managed to grate as his head throbbed, "are you all right?"

"Apart from the agony yes," the knight managed to reply, closing her eyes and trying to will the pain away, "is everyone still with us?"

There were combined murmurs and she couldn't untangle them, however there were enough voices that she reckoned everyone was in more or less one piece, if hurting. Slowly they began picking themselves up, stilling only when someone looked forwards past the only one of their number still on her feet and saw something else, something almost as terrible as the damned warrior of mana had been,

"No," Nissa's voice was a whisper, one she repeated more loudly, "no, not after that." She had no idea what the necromancer had done but surely, surely it was enough; however as the smoke of the former giant began to drift away all that remained was dust and a single shadow, becoming ever more solid in the gloom. *Up, get up* ; she demanded of herself, grounding her stave and forcing herself to sit; *the others are wounded, I at least know how to fight without casting* . She knew how to fight; whether she could when every muscle was screaming from over-exertion after feeding that terrible spell was a different matter but regardless it seemed she'd not be on her own in whatever battle awaited. Everyone was moving, everyone was at least trying to get to their feet as the mana dispersed and the figure resolved,

"Well, have to say, that I wasn't expecting."

It was the old man and he looked as drained and weary as any of them, his hat askew, most of his pans missing and swaying on his feet as he faced down the only one of them who could feasibly pose

a challenge to him even if she couldn't; *wait, her binding is gone - does that mean…?* ;

"You," the woman's voice was colder than before, "undo what you've done to me and I may let you live."

"What I've done brat?" The man sounded weak and exhausted but he was better off than his contemporaries; Nissa could see the other five, including the woman who'd beaten her, unmoving behind him, either as badly off as they were or, hopefully, dead, "I've done nothing yet, though cheek me further and I might do. After all," he reached into one of the pouches of his backpack and withdrew something even she couldn't pick out at this distance, "one who relies solely, no pun intended, on another would do well not to draw the ire of that other."

It was the strangest sensation to feel your heart skip a beat but not feel why; it was also one Liliana was getting far too familiar with as she saw the glimmering phial he held and knew, instinctively knew what was contained within, what it meant this old man had over her,

"How?"

"First rule when dealing with demons, they always listen to a better offer," Timothy told her, the thing dancing in his fingers a lure without price, "half of a soul I had no need of worked out a lot better for each of them than a quarter of yours, especially as mine had no strings attached and no chance of betrayal. So I got what I wanted and so did you; everyone should be happy, you especially - you've got eternal life, youth, beauty and power and all it cost you was this. Now I'm afraid my associates are likely to be out of action for quite some time so, if you wouldn't mind, could you just tidy up over there and we can move on."

"Tidy up?"

"Yes; oh come now you of all people should know how this deal works," the old man sounded exasperated as, behind the necromancer, one who knew her better than the rest felt his mouth dry up; *she'll do it if he offers - I have to get ready, damn it, I can't cast anything* ; "you get the power from your demons; which I control your access to by the way, hence why you're not currently on the floor screaming as you were before; I keep this, you do as I tell you and everyone gets what they want. Now, just a trickle should do," his gnarled hand twisted and Liliana stiffened, feeling a slight burn from the mana of the swamps as it flowed into her, "make it quick please, no need to torm…"

"No."

"No?"

"No," Liliana said again, her tone unchanging, "I was promised life and I'm not living - this is existence, if that."

"Oh, a proper demonic attorney are you?" Timothy's moustache quivered as he raised the phial, "It's too late to quote scripture at me brat; you made your deals, I merely took them over."

"And I can break them," that did make him step backwards, almost treading on one of his friends who was starting to rise, "I won't live feeling nothing but pain and I will not serve another master."

"So you'd throw away your life, and more, for them? Would you stick to such noble intent even if I promised to give you this back?"

"You wouldn't, even you're not that much of a fool," the scoff was an action long years of working with fools had made reflexive, "there's no guarantee and you'd not pay up front. It's over," smoke curled around Liliana's hand, a chattering skull she cast into the floor, a useless waste of the power she'd been granted, "I'm done - you've got my soul, choke on it."

"So it would seem," the explorer said heavily before shrugging, "oh well, I never really had a use for it anyway." No-one, least of all Liliana, was expecting the small vial to tumble through the air towards her, the necromancer once again recognising the symptoms of shock but not feeling them as she reached out and caught it, seeing the ethereal glow from within,

"Why?"

"Because you're not scum," the white mage said heavily, for the first time looking his age as he sank to a knee, the other five of their enemies also recovering, "I've seen people abandon their friends for that temptation, they might not have known what they were getting into exactly but it's no excuse as I see it. You could have killed them and you'd have felt nothing, not even guilt, and it's still your choice. If you do take that back that'll be it; you will have only the strength and skill you had, no further help from your overseers and you'll age just like the rest of us. And be aware, it'll likely be a heavy burden even though you've not missed it long."

All eyes, certainly all those who understood exactly what bargains the dark mage had made, were on her as Liliana held the small bottle up to the light then, as though it was vanish unless she was careful, she lowered it to herself. Nothing happened for an instant and then she convulsed, the runes of strength and binding placed onto her by her former masters flaring, writhing and then boiling off into purple smoke, leaving her bereft of her strength.

There was no great joy, no uplifting sensation as she was reunited with what she had traded away; all that greeted her was guilt, horror as she was forced to recount the past, seeing memories she had long ago put from her mind and feeling everything behind them.

As the last wisps of her former strength were blown away she staggered, tears this time falling with venomous intent; *Josu, brother I am so sorry, for you and the others* ; and there were many others, so many others she couldn't put names to faces, all either dead or sacrificed to further her goals. She had shed few tears then despite

her soul being intact but now, returned, the pain seemed amplified, so powerful it tore through her iron will like it was paper; she felt nauseous, her stomach roiling as though she'd been kicked hard. She could only look down, feel the grass between her fingers, the breeze blowing in off the sea and, belatedly, hear the anguished scream of one of the assembled planeswalkers behind her.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 - Between You All.

I don't… ; and he didn't, beyond everything else that had happened - the threat of his own death multiple times, protecting and being protected by complete strangers and close friends this was beyond him. As Jace Beleren finally managed to come to his feet aching in places he was previously unaware he'd had and saw the shaking shoulders of his one-time lover he felt just profound disbelief. First Liliana had defeated the summoned aspect of their enemies, then she hadn't turned traitor when the most important prize she could ask for was dangled before her - she had even been willing to die, if not for them, then to lessen her pain. It was something that under normal circumstances he would have been wondering about for days but as he saw the other figures slowly pick themselves up before the crumpled necromancer he realised these were far from usual times,

"Ready to go another round?" He said to the woman beside him, trying to force a flicker of amusement into his tone that came out as exhaustion, "Can you cast anything, I'm absolutely spent. Chandra?" At her silence he looked over in time to see her pulling up her goggles, the topaz of her eyes revealed as she looked forwards, then swept her gaze around slowly with the strangest expression. It looked like she was simultaneously trying to remember and forget something and as she looked towards the sky he took a gamble, tentatively touching her on the shoulder,

"Chandra are you all right?" The contact seemed to earth her and she faced him, her smile was genuine and made him feel odd within until it curdled, cracked and he skidded backwards, almost tripping over his cloak as she suddenly bellowed into the sky. It was a sound of absolute and utter frustration and it made all heard turn towards her as, forgetting pain, exhaustion, adrenaline and all other concerns she took a step forwards, a deadly intent in her glare as she pointed towards their fallen enemies,

"I'm going to kill you; I don't care if it's impossible I'm doing it anyway!" She marched forth again only to be dragged to a halt as Jace seized her arm, concerned at her sudden plunge into insanity,

"Chandra what…?"

"Jace, of course you," the mind-mage belatedly thought grabbing her might have been a bad idea; the grin she favoured him with made Exava look normal, "you understand yeah, you'll hold and I'll hit! Look around," she waved an arm towards the horizon wildly, "tell me where we are!"

Everyone saw the Ravnican do as she asked and confused glances deepened to concern as Jace staggered, pallor draining from his face as something seemed to dawn on him,

"Ah, I wondered when that would happen," it was Tim who was speaking, the elderly man now regarding the staggered duo with amusement as they turned towards him, Jace raising a shaking finger,

"But, you," he was panting, almost hyper-ventilating as he looked from one of their enemies to the other, another heinous truth rocking him to the core, " *all* of you?"

"'Fraid so," said a much more cheerful voice, Mel springing to her feet athletically before spoiling the effect by falling onto her rear, "ooh, head-rush. Okay before anyones' head explodes," the warning was timely, both Chandra and Jace were shaking in fury, "guess we'd better come clean."

"What she means by that," Splay-Paw took over as he span to his feet, his perfectly normal speech making the whole scene surreal for those who knew him, "is that you, collectively, think that we wrote your books and caused all this. You're right and wrong," the rodent was surrounded by the others, the half-dozen aggressors resolute and facing down those they had tormented, "there is a common thread between you all as Jace and Chandra now know; Kaguya-

san," the soratami glanced over at her name and was shocked by the gentleness of his smile as he spoke, "don't be alarmed."

With that said twelve eyes on six different people closed and when they opened again they were changed; gone were the cold grey, the solid black, the sparkling green - left in their place were rippled circles.

The silence was suffocating, disbelief profound; nothing moved but the wind for some time until, at length, the sight of the uniform, unsettling gazes drove someone to speak from her sitting position,

"So," Vraska's voice was measured as she tried to work out what was going on, "who are…?"

"Uzumaki Naruto," Chandra spoke through gritted teeth, wanting to both stare a hole through his collective head and never set eyes on him again, "why - was this some kind of joke to you?!"

"No," Spikes answered, the actual urgency in his tone making several people swap glances, "this was a never a joke Chandra-san, none of this was. Listen all of you, it's time for us to go and I'll be damned glad to get out of this tin can. Elspeth Tirel, Koth of the Hammer," the two regarded their enemy warily before to their shock he brought up his gauntlets, the knuckles of his right overlaying those of his left, a Vulshok gesture of respect as he lowered his head, "you never had anything to prove to me."

Even as he exploded into smoke, his empty armour rattling to the ground to leave his former opponents horrified Mel, still smiling, stepped forwards, her changed eyes warm as she spoke,

"Vraska-san I wish I'd had someone like you there when I was younger; please don't ever change. And Princess," a warning tone crept into her voice as she held a fist out towards Nissa, "don't forget what happened here, and we'll have a rematch someday. Bye." She

too was gone, destroyed as Exava, her smile genuine, faced them all,

"Sorry but the real ones' still on Ravnica writing you love notes Chandra-san; if I could have gotten rid of her I would but that would likely caused Jace-san more headaches breaking in another Rakdos for the Guildmeet - farewell."

"I supposed I'd best be moving on too," Timothy sighed as his contemporaries imploded all about him, "it was a pleasure to meet you again young man, and you brat," Liliana looked up, stunned as the old man smiled semi-sternly, "remember the difference between price and worth. Ah well, thus ends the von Pomperduke line!"

"Contract expired Moon Sage," Splay-Paw chuckled, throwing his weapons to the floor, "stupid-man and cloud-gaze saved your head, be grateful to them always." He bowed low and then vanished even to Kaguya's sight as the last of their enemies stepped forwards, looking between her opponents before smiling her gentle, knowing smile,

"I've said all I need to, you two will work the rest out together."

"Wait…" Jhon'ee disappeared before Gideon could finish, the hieromancer feeling an unexpected loss that she simply wasn't there anymore. However as the smoke of the destruction began to clear it became obvious someone was and, as a playful wind blew the last wisps away eleven planeswalkers were left gawking, two were left fuming and the last one, his eyes as strange as any of those who had just left, was left to make introductions,

"Yo."

It was quiet before, now there was absolute and utter still; the shock was so deep it went beyond the tranquil and into the profound. It was the kind of quiet that monks meditated their entire lives to hear, that hermits craved and most would never have an inkling existed, then it was broken by a sudden crackle,

"Hey," Naruto dived forwards as the feeble spark, all Chandra had left, tried to set him on fire, "look I know you're upset…"

"You have no idea," the fire mage was furious, stalking forwards despite her pain, "why, why put us through all this?!"

"Look, let me explain…"

"No, just no," it was Jace this time, the Ravnican first as angry as his housemate before the rage guttered out - he sounded tired as he regarded the child wearing orange, his chained book looped over one shoulder and a sword he'd not seen before over the other, "no more explanations Naruto, please; just take us home, we've had enough."

"Enough?" The boy paused, laughing softly as he regarded his denouncers, "I'd say you have no idea what the word means but," he slapped the book at his side, "since he talks too much you actually do. You both know what he said; you still claim you've had enough?" The question stopped them both in their tracks, each grasping for a retort but beaten to the punch by another of the assembled planeswalkers sick of being left out the loop,

"What the hell is going on," Koths' temper flared, unlike the mana he was only just recovering following whatever Liliana had demanded from them all, "who are you and where is that bastard knight, and how do those two know you?"

The boy took a breath, the kind of breath someone about to undertake a difficult, maybe painful task might take before he turned to face them all, his eyes changing and the ripples fading away under a sheen of bright blue, the boy's sunshine hair a stark contrast to his suddenly serious mood,

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto, just call me Naruto," he began, "however you also know me as Splay-Paw, Jhon'ee and the rest who just disappeared; I'm also slightly better known as V. R. Thos, author

of the 'Herotica' series of books you were, with one exception, introduced to earlier."

"You were all those people?" As the child nodded Venser shook his head, "That's not possible."

"Kage bunshin no jutsu," there was a pop of smoke and a duplicate of the orange-clad human appeared; the clone then twisted his hands oddly and Mel appeared again, looked around, waved and then vanished as she had before.

"That," Liliana spoke with equal parts trepidation and curiosity - it was seldom indeed she got to see anything new, "that spell, it creates…"

"Later; I will explain everything after this," Naruto cut her off as he stepped forwards, his eyes on of the assembled as she stood tall to meet him remembering the eyes she had seen before, a memory she could recall from after the taste of the strange fruit, "Kaguya-san…"

"Do not hurt her," Tamiyo stood before her friend, warning in her tone as she stared the human down imperiously, "she has suffered enough at the hands of your kind." Naruto nodded sadly, remembering his first meeting with the injured moonfolk, pulling her from the Blind Eternities and hearing her sad story through ears very different to his own,

"I know; Kaguya-san I am so sorry, I am from the plane of your sons."

"My sons," the soratami repeated, trying to deny her tears as she recalled more than just their eyes, "what happened to them?"

"They are worshipped as the creators of a way of life as are you Kaguya-san; they brought peace to a land of war and hatred"; *true enough, the ninja system wasn't perfect but it was better than the clash of armies that preceded it* ; "you will be forever remembered

there and, through you and their teachings, all will be well when my work is done. For the sake of everything that was and will be again," Naruto sank into the deepest bow he could make to the soratami who had, through overcoming her trials, made the dreams of the Blind Eternities possible, "thank you."

Tamiyo felt a hand on her shoulder and stepped aside as her friend moved forwards, tears trickling down her cheeks as she faced the small boy,

"Please stand," she whispered, Naruto doing so and the two regarding each other for a long moment before she stepped forwards, her arms draping around his neck as his went around her middle, the two embracing for a moment before she stepped back, letting her eyes dry as Naruto spoke,

"Take care of her Tamiyo-san, she deserves every honour and respect."

"I know," the moonfolk sage assured him, Venser likewise nodding as he approached to a respectful distance, knowing that at times like this the two soratami were best left alone, "now please explain why you attempted to kill us."

"That was… right," Naruto took another breath, regarding all those assembled around him, "I'm going to ask from you all the same thing I once asked from Chandra Nalaar and Jace Beleren, patience and a chance to explain myself. They both managed, which if you know Chandra-san at all is a minor miracle," despite himself Gideon chuckled, Jace likewise smirking against his will as the firebrand glared at the prang to her pride, "so I'm sure the rest of you can as well. First things' first who am I and how do I know hot-and-cold over there; well, actually," his hand disappeared into a pocket of his jumpsuit and emerged holding something that made Jace suck in a breath,

"My memory-stone, Timothy had it!"

"And he was part of me," the former jinchuuriki assured the mind-mage, "I think it would better if you two did the introductions - be honest would they believe me if I told them? Would you?" The two shared a look that spoke volumes before, reluctantly, Chandra held out her gauntlet for the stone,

"Give us a minute and everyone gather around," she said wearily, even her anger exhausted as she realised whatever the planesmakers' game was it was something over all their heads; better to have an idea what was going on than be left in the dark, "and brace yourselves; what you see next is likely going to change everything you know like it did with us."

A moment later, Naruto a little way away sat on the grass facing the ocean, a small plume of mana flooded over all the assembled, Jace and Chandra with a hand each on the graven stone, working together to show all that the planesmaker had ever shown them.

They seem to be taking it well enough ; Naruto said nothing as the glare faded; *well, no-one's completely lost their mind just yet so I'll take what I can get. Seriously, when was Kozilek ever a good idea?* ; thoughts of that most enigmatic of the Eldrazi he was both master of and servant to occupied him for a moment before he saw movement in the assembled and stood, running a finger down Kuramas' spine for luck and hearing the tome shiver,

"So then I… huh?" He saw the green-blue blur rushing towards him and had just enough time to field the bounding mergirl as Kiora ploughed into him, hugging tightly, "Uh, okay - where was this when I told you what I was doing?"

"I have my dignity," Jace replied, stowing the memory stone in his robe,

"You didn't show them everything did you *shitagi*- san," Jace had no idea what that meant but guessed nothing good, an estimation only underlined when he noticed the curious glances from the two

soratami now regarding him, "but for now you get a reprieve - uh, Kiora-san please let go before Jura-san starts flaying me with more than just his eyes." She sniffed heavily, refusing to leave his embrace,

"You calmed Zendikar," she breathed, shaking like a leaf, "you got rid of the Roil; thank you, thank you, we can never…"

"There's no need; Revane-san please stand up and Kiora-san let go," the elf did as she was bid, recovering from the kneeling pose of absolute abasement she'd sunk into though the mergirl took a little more persuading but eventually retreated, awe shining in her eyes as Naruto regarded the pair of them gently,

"Neither of you owe me anything; the mana of that plane was too dangerous, it might well have scoured the whole plane clean with a little ill-fortune. I also felt terrible for the Eldrazi being put there in the first place, it was the least I could do. Now, I mean it, think and say no more about it, it is done."

"Done? How can you just," Venser had his head in his hands, the memories he'd seen, even from people he knew were trustworthy, still refusing to grind through his mind, "you calmed a plane, you *make* planes like this one. I recognise it now, this is uh…"

"Ilyonde," Chandra supplied helpfully, letting the artificer go on,

."..yeah, you made Ilyonde and several others besides because the Eldrazi, the embodiments of the Blind Eternities, had a plan to unmake most of the Blind Eternities which were created when something happened to the Universe, the aftermath of which was the Multiverse?"

"That's a concise way of putting it."

"So," he went on faintly, "so why are we even here? What could we possibly do to you - you're beyond us, beyond anything we can

possibly dream of or achieve; we're ants, less than that, but you sent those, copies of yourself after us - I don't understand why."

"Do any of you?" Naruto enquired, sighing at the collective shaking of heads, "Well it's for… I'd like to say it was for noble reasons, and partly it is, but mostly it's because of something I did without thinking and by the time I knew what I was doing it was too late - what is seen can't be unseen, even by me. I said my spark merged with the Eternities upon my ascension didn't I," they all nodded, "what I didn't tell you was what that meant; I *merged* with the Eternities, I became part of it just as the Eldrazi are. I was, it's difficult to explain; I was everywhere and nowhere, all at once; I sensed everything, where it all was and where it all needed to be again - I don't even know how long I was there, the only thing I do know is that when I was there, being told by the Eternities what I needed to know, that was when I first saw you all."

"You saw us," Nissa repeated before her keen mind leapt to a guess, "when we were planeswalking?" Naruto nodded,

"I said, as I hope you were shown, that the Eternities are aware of those within them when they step between planes. When I was merged and began to understand what the Eternities required of me I became aware as well; I sensed you all, not even knowing who or what you were, and I was at your shoulder through your travels. I walked with you all forever and for instants; time doesn't exist there; I saw through your sparks who you were and, when you left, when you stepped out," he shuddered as though remembering something terrible, "I walked ahead a little way. I shouldn't have done it but I didn't realise what I was doing until it was too late; I couldn't forget what I'd seen and, damn it, I couldn't just let it be."

"What did you see?" Garruk was the one to ask but Naruto was not the one to answer, instead Tamiyo caught her breath, the soratami horror-struck as she regarded the child anew; in the place where no reality existed there was but one thing he might know; *walking ahead, in time as well as space* ;

"You saw the future."

"No," the planesmaker shook his head, "there is no future Tamiyo-san; there are infinite futures, for all of you," his whole being radiated sadness as he faced them all, "I saw trials you might never face, wars you might never be part of, deals you might never make, curses you might never fall victim to, children and families you might never have and deaths you might not die. I saw you all, even you two when I finally stepped outside the Eternities again," he favoured Vraska and Kiora with a tender smile, "even dormant sparks I can sense, the touch of the aether glows to my eyes. My clones followed each of you, just faces in the crowd, animals in the bushes, birds in the trees to see who the strangers I had 'walked with were; I felt like I knew you all and I knew what might befall you. I couldn't let it happen, not some of it, not the worst," he looked down, unable face the victims of his crimes, "so, I meddled."

The words were leaden, their impact even more so; the planeswalkers regarding each other as a terrible truth began to dawn on them all - if Naruto had been all those other people, people they had seen before in the past then…

"You manipulated us," any emotion was good, so good after being bereft of them Liliana revelled in her sudden anger and shame, "we're here now because you pulled the strings for all of us! What did you do, what have you done to us?"

"You've already see what I've done, you most of all Liliana Vess," his gaze was cold as he regarded the necromancer, "the souls of two madmen who would have destroyed my plane I brokered with demons for yours, the Chain Veil I threw into the heart of a star a trap you never fell into. And the rest of you, I was there in ways great and small," his eyes, though blue, were not those of a child; they were the eyes of time itself, impossibly ancient and weary as he nodded to each of them, "a lost book and an assassins' blade, a drifting net in the tide, a stolen Azorius writ, the truth of the Eldrazi told before it caused pain and, most powerful of all save removing

the Eldrazi to the Eternities, realising a dream to give a plane peace."

"Tiszta," Koths' throat was tight, his fists clenched, "her second father, is you?"

"No," Naruto's voice was soft, his heart aching as he saw the impact of his revelations upon each of them, the magnitude of what he'd done sinking in, "I'm not a god Koth-san, I cannot create and I very rarely destroy. I, in the guise of Spikes, was telling the truth; Yawgmoth's dream was to create a perfect machine and every Phyrexian at their heart was trying to do just that - what they did in pursuit of that dream was unspeakable and their Father deserves to burn in whatever hell he's in now, but the idea itself? There are very few evil dreams but many evil ways to achieve even the noblest dream; on Mirrodin I spoke to the praetors, told them how their dream could be realised; within the Eternities nothing is absolute. They gathered all of New Phyrexia, every drop of its oil, every iota of their Fathers' legacy and I thrust them into the maelstrom, where their overriding dream took form from all of them. Tiszta is what she is and no more; a machine that truly lives with the potential to planeswalk one day; is that bad," he looked to each of them, more than sorrow in his gaze, now; instead it was a need, a vehement thirst for reassurance, "was I wrong to give Phyrexia life?"

The Vulshok could only shake his head, the magnitude of what this child had done overwhelming him; he should hate, or should he? How could he hate someone who had given him his beloved daughter, saved his home even if he…

"Then why tell us?" It was Vraska who spoke, the gorgon less given to emotion than most present, "I am less affected by what you have done but I know you have caused pain; why say anything and reveal yourself to us - had you carried on as you had been none of us would have ever known."

"I don't care," Kiora said unexpectedly, wiping her eyes and side by side with Gideon, her hand engulfed by his, "if he hadn't, Jhon'ee

was you wasn't she?"

"Yeah, a clone of me; when they disperse I gain all their memories."

"Well if she hadn't caught me I don't know, I don't want to know where I'd be now. Your net brought us together," she cried unashamedly, her last words muffled as she felt a warm hand on her head, holding her close as no-one had since she'd swum from her mother with heart her rent in two, "without you we'd never have met." All present watched two embrace, looking to each other and realising the youngest of them spoke wisely; whatever face they had seen the planesmaker behind, had he ever truly done them harm?

"Hard to damn someone for having good intentions," Venser said thickly, regarding the two he'd been introduced to and realising that, yes, overall it had been worth the attentions of the false-nezumi to know both soratami, "but, I think Vraska said it, why this, why reveal yourself? You wanted to help us fine, good for you and us, so why the books and this whole damned fight?" Naruto smiled sadly, reaching for something at his hip,

"Because what I did was wrong but by the time I realised that it was too late to stop, I'd already… well, you can never set the future but I'd made some outcomes much more likely than others. I'd interfered, just like the Eldrazi did with the older 'walkers, and I didn't even realise until I, ah, recreated someone I used to know," if anyone noticed Jace and Chandra shuffling backwards at the sight of the book he pulled into his lap no-one mentioned it as it began to glow red, "and he told me how much of a manipulator I'd been."

There was a bright red glare and when it faded the book was gone, replaced by a small body that leapt off the planesmaker and stood before them all, stretching off before cocking an ear at his name,

"Kurama?"

" **Indeed**," there was a collective intake of breath at the voice as the small fox glanced up at the mind-mage, " **come anywhere near me**

and I'll repay those four days I owe you ." Jace looked shame-faced, his guilt not helped as Chandra failed to wrestle down a snort before speaking,

"So you're not just a book then?"

" **No; did you tell the rest about me?** " *Damn it, we forgot those memories* ;

"Ah, no; everyone this is Kurama, this is, well, he's the Eldrazi that was bound into Naruto when he was born; remember he was jin-something, I can never remember that word."

"The one you merged to when your spark lit?" The planesmaker smiled at Koths' question,

"Kind of; I merged to the whole Eternities but he was the catalyst for it," the former jinchuuriki explained, holding out a hand his former bijuu, now in his much more controlled form, sat by the side of him not moving as the human scratched between his ears, "my ascension turned him back into an Eldrazi, removed all the emotions your son, Kaguya-san, gifted to him," the soratami smiled even as she wept; *that my children would do such things - they were always more than their father* ; "so when I realised I needed a hand in what I was doing I went and found him again, gave back to him what the spark had taken. Thing was, when I did that and told him what I'd done so far, he set me on the straight and narrow why that might be a bad thing."

" **Forward-planning was never his strong point**," the fox chipped in, drawing a nasty look before he went on, " **though in a lot of cases I agreed with him. Still it wasn't a total loss and together we came up with a way to work around what he'd done; we could speak to you all. The first thing we had to find was a reason for all of you to come together but it had to be a subtle one, one that would encourage curiosity rather than the paranoia you seem so fond of. You had to know you were known but not by who by or for what reason** ."

"Hence V. R. Thos coming into being; Ero-sennin was good for an idea or two," memories of his perverted teacher made the ninja smile before he carried on, "so…"

"You wrote a series of *ecchi* books with us as the main stars?" Tamiyos' voice was frigid, several of the others also regarding him askew as the reminder rankled, "Why not just talk to us individually as you did Jace-san and Chandra-san?" Naruto looked uncomfortable, staring at the ground,

"Because I couldn't think of anything better; I don't know everything and I admit that freely. I needed to find a way to talk to you all, and it had to be all together - if I'd tried to explain this individually you'd probably have thought me crazy and it wouldn't have solved anything. And apart from that I needed a hobby given the job I do and it turned out I had a knack for drawing, then I remembered one of my teachers and wanted to do something in his honour; I was questioning the decision right up until the first draft of *Beast and Beauty* was at the publishers and it was too late to stop. I made a mistake, maybe," he held his hands up, "I'm not perfect, never said I was. And anyway ramen's not free - I gotta eat too you know. Just be grateful you ended up in 'Herotica' rather than my godfather's 'Icha Icha'; I got your anatomical details through imagination, he'd have used a telescope."

That put a collective shiver through every spine, a few faces reddening before the fox spoke again,

" **Regardless of the means this meeting was set in motion; you all found each other, though mostly that was down to you**," Liliana felt eyes on her and reddened further - she was usually the spider in the centre of the web, not a fly caught in one, " **at your meeting this deception was revealed, as was the other purpose for you all coming together. Naruto's old man mask said it best; arrogance was ever your downfall**," there was a knowing in the transformed Eldrazi's tone, an unsubtle jab as his eyes met each of them in turn, " **how could you planeswalkers be threatened by**

anything; you're the greatest casters and suchlike in the Multiverse, what could be beyond you? "

"Why didn't…?"

" **You wouldn't have believed him and you know it**," the bijuu scythed Nissa's question down without mercy, " **if he'd come out and said what he's saying now you'd never have listened, or you'd have gotten irate and threatened to kill him or otherwise take your vengeance. By doing what he did, showing you the varied authors you all knew, he gave you a chance to avenge your pride**," the irony in the inhuman tone was caustic, " **and eventually you managed** ."

"Only after we were wounded," Koth grated, punching his hands together venomously as he glanced at the silent Elspeth, the knight listening but saying nothing, "some of us worse than others. There's blood on your hands regardless of how noble your motives were fleck."

"I know that, accepted I'd shed blood the moment I put on this head band," Naruto rapped the plate of metal he wore around his head, the symbol engraved within still shining brightly, "I'm a ninja Koth-san, a warrior trained to kill and fight - I swore to do what was needed and I still hold to that even after my ascension. I followed you in the worlds and beyond, spoke to those who knew you wearing a multitude of faces; there is no-one on the planes who collectively knows you better than I do. Yes I brought you here to a fight and yes I wounded some of you but you won, you beat my six authors and then my aspect, a technique I modified from one of the strongest jutsus, or spells, of my plane. That I didn't expect but you broke my aspect of annihilation by going beyond mana, beyond magic itself - how?"

The question caught them off-guard; Naruto was saying no more, focussing on his former prisoner as the fox quietly prepared himself to step in if, as he suspected, the planesmaker refused to see the last part of his act done until, at last, a gruff voice answered,

"As a pack," Garruk had his axe grounded, regarding the child from under his heavy eyebrows, "none alone could have done it."

"Yes," Naruto echoed his former teacher; though he could barely remember the Copy-nin now he would never forget that lesson, "to paraphrase one of the greatest of the old 'walkers, imperfect people can make a perfect team. How many of you knew each other before you came here? A handful, if that," he waited for a series of nods before finishing, "and now, given what you've done, how many of you will forget each other?" *As always* ; as it had been for him at least; *when the curtain falls you kick yourself for not realising it* . He'd thought the bell test unfair and unpassable but, in hindsight, realised how powerful its message truly was, something now sinking in to those assembled before him,

"So," Gideon spoke first, "you had us fight to make us work together?"

"You at least would understand Jura-san, you already know about self-sacrifice," the planesmaker told him, a smile that had once graced a Kors' face now on his, "few others here do. Only in the face of danger, up against other casters as strong or stronger than yourselves did you unite, and in doing so you proved me right as well."

"How?"

"Most of you were strangers to each other but when you had to you stepped in to save each other," those cerulean orbs again seemed depthless as he looked over each of them, no trace of satisfaction in his face, more one of gratitude that a weight had been lifted from his soul, "when one of you fell another shouldered the burden. Any of you could have run, abandoned your potential rival 'walkers in the Multiverse but you didn't - you all, some more eventually than others," Nissa couldn't meet his gaze, "stepped in and altered each others' futures just as I did - all I wanted to do was help a stranger."

All was quiet, the only movement being Kurama moving out of reach of his jinchuuriki, preparing to end some of the suffering the human he would have once slain without thought was undergoing, something the rest here were ignorant to,

" **None here**," the fox's vice was solemn as he looked between the planeswalkers and the planesmaker who had brought them together, " **should judge my former jailor; out of all thirteen of you only two have an idea how heavy his burdens are** ."

"Though I did tell him not to tell you…"

" **And I ignored you, for your own good as well as theirs**," the miniature bijuu snapped back, " **Jace Beleren, Chandra Nalaar, you have felt the weight of the Eternities haven't you?** " All eyes were on them as the two stepped slightly closer together, Chandra shivering as she recalled that terrible blankness, the endless void pressing down,

"Yes," Jace answered slightly the faster, his voice far away; alcohol and sleep-deprivation hadn't dulled that memory, "it, it's the weight of nothing, endless nothing, and the need for there to be something to replace it. The Eternities want to be remade into what they were, the burden of the Eldrazi."

"It lessens as I work," Naruto admitted, voice hard as he fixed his former demon with a gimlet eye; *we'll be having words later* ; "the more I restore the less that burden gets."

" **And the greater the other becomes.** "

"No!" Naruto shot to his feet, eyes flashing as he beheld his former prisoner, "They have heard enough for now!"

" **If not now when**," the smaller creature barked back, squaring up to the planesmaker as their audience watched on mystified, " **I will suffer the honest liar no more Naruto! You've done all you could to help them, it's time they repaid the favour!** "

"Wait, what - I gave no…?"

" **You give nothing to anyone if you can help it; how does it feel to feel again, or did you forget that little detail already?** " Liliana was forced to look away under the fox's cutting comment, shame writhing in her belly like a pinned snake, " **So, you know what Naruto is, the power he controls to remake what was; this plane you stand upon is a testament to his goal, and some of you even know part of the burden he labours under. But none of you, even those who have hunted our works, have seen the truth; this place, Ilyonde, what do you see when you look upon it?** "

Several glances were swapped, confusion apparent as the planeswalkers tried to work out what the small creature meant; one or two muttered conversations took place until, eventually, one of them spoke,

"It seems, as much as I know of these things, normal," Vraska admitted, the gorgon still sat as the pain in her leg prevented her moving much, "is there something we are unaware of?" The fox, as much as it seemed able to, smiled,

" **Not unaware of, something you don't acknowledge - you don't look beneath the, uh… how did that white-haired human say it Naruto?** "

"Underneath the underneath," the former ninja sounded weary as his former prisoner went on,

" **Yes, that; what do you think Naruto - this plane is as the Eternities wanted it, is it what you want?** "

"You already know the answer."

" **They don't - you tell them or I do, I won't let you keep this in any more** ."

"All right," the words seemed dragged from the planesmaker as though by hooks, "damn it you walking flea-bag all right. This plane, Ilyonde, is like all the others I've made; it's nothing, it's *worthless* ."

His voice rose into a shout, thick with loathing as the planeswalkers took a collective step back, unsure how to react to the anger of a being that could ultimately undo everything,

"I, would not call it that Naruto-san," Tamiyo tried to pour oil over troubled waters and had to bite back a shiver as his eyes found hers - the suffering in them was like a knife grinding into flesh,

"Why not; Jace-san called me the planesmaker, a title I don't deserve. I make planets not planes, houses not homes - Ilyonde, Illustria, all of them are jewels, tiny jewels suspended in the Eternities and they were never meant to be that. Look around you," he gestured to the sea behind them, the sky above, "there's nothing here apart from us and when we're gone there'll be nothing again. It'll be empty, a perfect world that was never meant to be perfect; it should be alive," a sudden wrath and grief made his eyes change, the planesmaker looking at his hands and the creation they had made as though he could tear it asunder, "and it is not, it will never be."

"Why not?" Vraska sounded honestly confused, "Why don't you fill…?"

Someone caught their breath nearby, a sound soon echoed as by the gorgon as she saw Naruto's face fall, his expression destroyed and she along with the others realised,

"You…" Chandra's voice was a hoarse croak, the firebrand both desolated for his sake and furious with herself; *almost a year following him and sometimes succeeding and I never asked why there was no-one there - damn it that was how this started* ; "..you can't bind to anything; you can't summon creatures?"

"No," Naruto's voice was misery incarnate, his head bowed, "I can remake everything that was but I cannot repopulate it. If left in my hands the Universe will be barren, as bad as if it were never remade."

"So everything; oh kami of the sky and moon," Kaguya looked and felt ill, "every plane you make, you cannot people? But you have, you are…"

"Kami, or a god? I get that a lot but it's not true," Naruto cut her off bitterly, "I don't even know what I am apart from a fool, a meddler caught in an impossible bind - I must remake what was, it's the only purpose I can have but every time I do I see another empty vessel, an opportunity wasted. I said I brought you here for noble purposes, in part I lied; there was another purpose here, my own. I cannot do this anymore and you who I've meddled with are the only ones I can turn to," he swallowed, brought himself up to face them all and then let himself go; his knees bowed, his hands hitting the floor and forehead following, his supplication complete as he whispered,

"I ask, no, I'm begging you, as someone who deserves nothing but your scorn for what I've done, please help me make my houses homes - I make the planes, I need you to make them live because I can't."

None spoke; what could they say? A god, or a being as close to it as made little difference, on his knees in apology and pleading for aid - it was truly beyond surreal. Each of the thirteen glanced at each other, seeing only their own disbelief echoed back to each other; was he truly asking what they thought he was? The profound silence was so quiet and so engulfing one of them only realised who he was missing when he saw her stepping in front of him,

"Kiora," she looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes wet but determined,

"It's all right," the mergirl stepped forwards, gills pulsing in embarrassment as she realised all eyes were on her but she stayed

the course until she was mere feet from the bowed planesmaker,

"What do I have to do?" He glanced up,

"Eh?"

"You calmed Zendikar and you made my stream cross with Gideon Jura," the mergirl continued, reaching down to haul the boy to his feet, "there is nothing I can say or do that makes up for that. What do you need from me?" The earnestness in her face made Naruto work his jaw, whiskered cheeks reddening; *I see a flaw in this plan* ;

"I er, I don't know."

"What?" She spluttered, expression dropping off a cliff, "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I've never peopled a plane before," Naruto explained hastily, his embarrassment not helped by the fox he could see visibly sniggering behind her, "I was hoping one of you would have an idea."

"But, you, that - ah, you're hopeless!"

"Hopeless? I'm putting existence back together!"

"Oh you can make planes, big deal; I found the temple of Ula, beat that!"

"I stole a top-secret scroll from the leader of my village before I left school!"

"I beat a kraken," Kiora riposted, so lost in her bickering she didn't see those behind her looking anywhere other than at the argument,

"I had a demon shoved in my belly the night I was born and carried him for years," Naruto cut back smugly, the mergirl stumbling,

"Yeah well, well I'm taller than you!" Naruto's jaw dropped and he stepped forwards, measuring up before stepping back disgruntled,

"Damn it; all right you win," he admitted, Kiora hissing in triumph and sending a celebratory spray of water into the air, "don't make me do a Jhon'ee and throw you into the sea; I'll use a weighted net."

"You could try," the mergirl muttered, pricked by the reminder as Naruto looked past her to the remaining dozen planeswalkers, many of whom were stifling laughter with varying degrees of success,

"Listen, I know this has been a lot to take in…"

"You too have a mastery of understatement."

"Great, all the gorgons in the Multiverse and the sarcastic one gets a spark," he complained, favouring Vraska with a scowl before seeing her leg and flinching, "sorry about that but, well, the clones do get into character and that cultist really is completely out her tree - seriously who keeps trying to invite the person who melted their hand off into your club?" Chandra blanched,

"Wait, Exava keeps inviting me into the Rakdos? Did you kn- Jace!"

"Sorry," the Guildpact couldn't meet her eyes, "it was the best pain she's ever survived apparently. I wasn't sure how to tell you and, well, I thought it was amusing."

"Inside I'm dying of laughter," the pyromancer assured him acidly, "and you're going to die in a fire later. As are you if you don't do something about Vras Naruto; out of all of us she didn't deserve this."

"No, there's no need," the gorgon hadn't looked away from the planesmaker, starting to have an inkling of how he worked and extrapolating it, "because of this wound Nissa and Garruk both came to my aid, as others would for injured in the Swarm." Naruto nodded,

"Yeah, not sure if that was the clones' intent though; I get their memories, not an explanation of why they do what they do. Still it got Princess to help you out and after the jam you pulled her out of you

deserved every help she could give you." Seeing the interest on the faces of the others Nissa cringed,

"Please don't call me Princess; I will not… no, I cannot be as I was."

"Glad to hear it," Naruto faced the elf directly, understanding in his eyes but a hard edge to them as well, "I've seen what arrogance can do Nissa Revane-san, it's partly the reason my spark lit. Nothing that can't be cured with a punch in the face though - actually now I think about it that solves quite a few problems. Anyway as I was saying a lot to take in, I don't expect anyone to say or do anything now and I won't blame anyone who decides they never want to see me again. I'll take you back; you can't 'walk to Ravnica from here, it's too far away. Follow me; you coming?"

" **Nah, I'm going for a run**," the fox stretched out, a vulpine grin on his face, " **I'll catch up later** ."

"Just don't wreck anything," the planesmaker told his one-time prisoner, "come on, let's get out of here; fox needs a bit of space."

"What for?"

"Never seen a bijuu in the flesh before have you Garruk-san," the Wildspeaker shook his head, intrigued about this new prey, "well give it a minute and a bit of room you will. Follow me."

They did, everyone trekking behind the planesmaker until a sudden burst of mana behind them made them look back and see with horror the dreadful shape rising above the shore, its deadly tails whipping as it let out a deafening howl. The sound of its paws were thunder as it raced away, the earth shaking as the true form of the Kyuubi loped across the quiet, empty plane. *Go free old friend - funny how we hated each other once* ; Naruto remembered those memories fondly before noticing the expressions of those around him,

"His bark's worse than his bite, honest."

"You," Jace watched the terrible shape recede with dread; he thought he'd seen the horrors of Zendikar before but that was leagues beyond them, and it was only a fragment of one of the titans, "you carried him?"

"Yeah and he was a pain in the ass - still he's better now he gets a chance to stretch his legs every so often. Anyway we're not too far away, we should be back on your plane in a little while."

"Oh good," the Guildpact said faintly; really he should have been used to these bowel-loosening shocks by now but somehow he got caught out every time, "please tell me you haven't trapped anything; I don't think I could stand any more today."

"No, I've done nothing but you might need to undo the traps you set for me unless they've expired by now." The reminder made someone speak up, Gideon breaking from his introspection as a sudden question bothered him,

"How did you move us out of there Naruto, my mana should have undone any attempt at abjuration and I know mine was far from the only binding in place."

"I can answer that; it was teleportation," Venser chipped in, "that undermines the use of mana entirely, making most wards useless. Though how did you get us off Ravnica without us knowing?"

"Oh that's easy, I just moved the Guildhall."

Indeed he had moved the Guildhall, the Ravnican structure now looking complete out of place as it came within eyeshot after a brisk walk,

"Damn," Liliana whistled as she took in the evidence of their earlier battle, "I didn't realise we were off Ravnica until we were out of eye-shot of this place; did you know beastmage?" Garruk shook his head, his mind on other prizes such as the mighty fox he had seen race away; *a true hunt that would be, though it is not a beast* ;

"But, how did it get here? You couldn't have teleported it, could you?"

"Not easily," Naruto assured the artificer, "I had, ah, you know, a bit of help to carry it here." Gideon pulled up short, suspicious,

"I thought you couldn't summon?"

"I never said that," Naruto clarified the hieromancers' question, "my spark is bound to the Eternities; only those within heed my calls." There was a second of silence, than another, then,

"You summoned an Eldrazi in Ravnica," Chandra sounded half-horrified, half-amused, "that'll stir things up - Jace are you crying?"

"They'll be rioting in the streets," the Guildpact moaned, "I'm staying here, I'm not going back to that mess!" The fire mage put a reassuring arm around him but failed to look too sympathetic as she led him along, a few of the others regarding the building with some trepidation and some awe, especially when Naruto stepped forwards with a shining blue ball in his free hand,

"Give me a little credit, I've got clones back there hiding the loss, no-one'll be any the wiser. Anyway, inside everyone; time for us to go back."

The shining sphere flew into the air above the squat Boros building and then seemed to explode, tearing a hole in reality as they had seen in either memories or through their own eyes. From the revealed mists came ropes, tendrils of being thick as tree trunks questing, reaching, oozing down over the brickwork, wrapping around it as a snake would crush prey. Naruto watched and stepped forwards a few paces only to realise he was alone,

"Oh come on, this is how we got here," he explained, though oddly enough none of the assembled seemed willing to take him up on his offer, "look this is one of Ulamog's brood, they're perfectly safe and straightforward - I will not let you fall."

"Ula-mog," Nissa repeated in a faint voice as visions of the memory stone came back to her mind, "your, or the titans, they are…" The planesmaker cringed,

"Ah, yeah, sorry; I forgot you guys are from Zendikar. Yes, I'm afraid the titans are where your gods got their names, just their names though - trust me Eldrazi don't answer prayers."

"That's fine, been an atheist ever since that damned temple," Kiora tried to put a brave face on it, though her hand stayed resolutely in Gideons' as he approached the constricted building. Naruto ushered them all in, casually absorbing the mana of their spells from the doorway and accompanying them to the main room where all this had begun. When all were seated and semi-comfortable he smiled and spoke,

"Right, we should be back in Ravnica in a little while, I'll be up top steering - ja ne."

He left, feeling all eyes on him and keeping up his pretence until he closed the door behind him, then he leant against them heavily, breathing hard as it hit him what had happened, what that damned fox had made him do. *They might well hate me* ; and he wouldn't blame them, if he'd found out someone had messed around with his future he'd have been out for blood; *but, I had to tell them. It was nice of Kiora to say what she did but if she or Gideon-san later thinks it's a bad idea, if any of them do, it's up to them - I'll have to think of something else. At least I tried* ; it would be cold comfort but a comfort nonetheless as jumped out the nearest window, the bricks under his sandals easily adhered to as he moved up towards the top of the building, tapping one of the Eldrazi's tentacles nearby and watching the mists approach as, slowly, it dragged them into the Blind Eternities.

The atmosphere could have been cut with a knife; it wasn't denial, it wasn't even trauma or disbelief; it was just sheer and complete loss of words. Even those previously exposed to the planesmaker were

lost in thought, looking from one to the other before looking away again, wanting to speak but having no idea how. The suffocating silence endured, pressing down on them like the Eternities outside until, at length, one of them found a topic related to the terrors of the day and wet her lips,

"You, ah, you have found the temple of Ula Kiora?"

"Hmm," the mergirl looked across at her fellow Zendikarian, "yeah, I did, we did - take it from me don't do it."

"Why?" The reminder pricked Chandra's memory, "What happened in there, you mentioned it before - I know Jh- uhh, well, he said about the different ones, you got to the end?"

"Yep and it wasn't worth it, bloody waste of time and I don't care if I have to write out a list, that place deserves a swear," she glared mutinously at her guardian only for the hieromancer to shrug,

"I personally thought it was a good lesson, if a little harsh."

"You would."

"Just because you ended up…"

"Don't say it!"

"Embarrassing their child is a guardians' privilege, now where was I…"

"I, I'll…"

."..by all means continue to stutter; ah yes, it was a series of temples and…"

."..I'll cock-block you!"

The silence didn't break, it didn't shatter, it was atomised - some accidental jokes just ignored tiny considerations like species,

language and dignity. Anything Gideon might have said was drowned under helpless hysteria at the sudden shriek, enough to infect even those the line had been aimed at and the innocent one who'd aimed it. For a long time there was only laughter, the unreality of the day earthing through the sudden release and helped as someone else took a hand in reducing the hieromancers' pride to a battered husk,

"H, hero," Liliana managed, hugging her aching stomach, "please, please let mehe know when you're giving her the talk, I'll sehehell tickets!"

"Careful," Kaguya looked over at the necromancer just long enough to gasp, "he may take you over his knehehehehe!"

"W, with the lash," Garruk howled, the table juddering under his fist, "worse than the pan!"

"Stop," Venser pleaded, his gut in spasm as nearby Chandra fell to the floor dry-heaving for air, "please stohohop, I'm gonna die!"

Fortunately it didn't come to that though in several cases it was close; as hands appeared over tables and people eventually straightened up, tears of laughter drying and faces hurting from grinning so hard, the one who had caused such chaos found herself glared at by the one who'd borne the brunt of it, Gideons' face crimson as Kiora tried very hard to think herself invisible,

"You know I said I'd never hate you?" Just as she looked stricken he put a hand on her shoulder, pulling her into his side, "I meant it, difficult as you make it sometimes." There was a brief pause before Vraska felt obliged to make certain,

"So, you two…?"

"My father," Kiora's voice was set in stone, though at Gideon's correction she looked up,

"Guardian; father raises far too many questions - you're still my child for better or, likely, worse." The mergirl hugged him, trying hard not to cry as a wave of emotions, thrust aside earlier, finally surfaced; patting her back softly Gideon looked over the assembled as though daring any to challenge him and finding only softness in every expression, the mood summed up when Koth stood with respect in his visage,

"The strongest bond you will ever forge is between family," he quoted before feeling a tap at his side and seeing Elspeth looking up at him, her expression troubled but resolute; *why would - oh* ; vaguely remembering something she had been saying just before the battle had ended he adhered to her request, the two of them standing and moving towards the closed doors until a voice brought them to heel,

"Oh, working on the sequel already?" There were several snorts at this, Venser not even trying to look innocent as a pair of gazes sought to burn him alive before Koth jerked a thumb over his shoulder,

"You too old man; leave the younger ones free of your lechery."

"Oh, a crossover," Liliana smirked, "so daring."

"Daring?" Venser ran a hand through his hair, "A warm-up compared to what I used to get up to…"

"Now you have trouble getting up at all," Koth took great pleasure in flattening his sometimes-insufferable friends' ego; where Elspeth worked off worry in practice and prayer and he forged iron the older 'walker was a ribald teller of tales and jokes, "come on, we won't be long; no comments and none follow us please." Elspeth was already crimson, glaring at the necromancer who merely waved back, the three of them retreating into the hallway as someone else, a scroll unfurled over the table and brush in hand, looked across at the two who held her interest,

"So, Jace-san, Chandra-san," the two glanced over, the firebrand still rubbing tear-tracks off her face, "how do you know Naruto-san?"

Settling against the wall Koth glanced over at the knight, his expression hardening,

"I'm annoyed with you Elspeth; no," he held up a hand as Venser made to interject, "you know I do not tolerate lairs and you lied to me. You swore…"

"I know, by lost Bant I know what I swore," the woman said, the laughter from earlier draining away as she prepared herself, "and I can hold to it no longer." She fell to her knees and drew her blade in the same motion, placing it against the side of her neck, the movement so sudden neither of her comrades were ready until it was done,

"Elspeth," Venser only just remembered to keep his voice down, regarding her position in shock; *the stance of the fallen* . Elspeth had told him some of the strictures of Bant and this one he remembered; if a knight was judged to have lost their honour they would adopt this stance and confess. If their confessionals thought them guilty the aggrieved party would slit their throat with their own weapon, the knight regaining their honour at the cost of their life; *but why would she…?* ;

"Stand," Koth's growl brooked no argument but she was unmoved,

"No, for what…"

"I don't care," Venser was forced back a pace by his rage, heat searing from Koths' exposed veins, "whatever you say you say as the blood-sister who stood with us against Phyrexia, not as a stranger on your knees. I swore you into the Hammer, now stand before me as one." The two locked eyes, unbreakable determination against steely resolve and Venser caught between them, grateful

when the blade quivered and was returned to its sheathe, Elspeth coming to her feet to face the Vulshok squarely,

"It was after the knight, Spikes, told us of Tiszta…"

The confession came slowly, stutteringly as Elspeth almost lost her courage several times; she had almost murdered the child of the man before her, a friend who had offered her his home and family. That she had fought and promised for the same child afterwards was immaterial; he had a right to know and she granted that right, telling both her friends what she had lived through under Jace Beleren's hand, the choice she had made. Venser wouldn't have been able to listen but for Koth's presence, the Vulshok inscrutable as she spoke about her thoughts, recounting each detail without pause and only the barest hint of the sentiments that must have been tearing her apart the whole time. The artificer could see how much telling that story cost the knight, by the end only her willpower was keeping her upright as she stood tall, not flinching in the face of possible death,

"I, can only say…"

"Say nothing," Koth's voice was almost as cold as Spikes had been, "You are sworn to the Hammer and as Hammer you are judged - Venser you are witness to this"

"Koth, wait, be…" the Vulshok glared at him and he fell silent, wanting to step between them, do anything to give the Vulshok's temper a chance to cool; Elspeth had done nothing wrong and, even if she had it hadn't been real, just a, a dream, or an ordeal - surely he couldn't… But his fist came up, a terrible weight that could break the back of a juggernaught with one punch and Elspeths' gaze was calm, her conscience clear,

"Please don't do this," Venser pleaded but he too as a sworn member of Koth's tribe could not step in - not only would it lead to the punishment being extended to him, Elspeth would never forgive him. So he watched, forcing himself not to look away as the blow fell, the Vulshoks' fist a blur that stopped an inch from the forehead it

would have shattered like chalk. Even as the artificers' breath caught there was another blur, the knight grimacing in pain as the Hammer leader flicked her forehead hard, leaving a mark that might bruise but no worse,

"It is done," Koth breathed heavily as Elspeth looked at him, confused before remembering Vulshok traditions; *a blow means all is over, the crime not spoken of again* ; the physical one was less powerful than the emotional one that followed it, she was kept upright only by the iron hand that held her cloak clasp as she sagged, "I trust Tiszta in your arms more than I do my own. You are my honoured sister, you will always be that and I will hold you to your promise Elspeth Tirel - if my daughter decides to take up the blade you'll be her teacher, I have witnesses who remember your words."

"You won't need them," she said faintly, clasping his arm with her own, "I am so sorry Koth, I thought, I really thought…"

"Forget what you thought," Venser stepped into the conversation, tone hard as he held her other shoulder, "this is what I know; when this is over we're going back to Mirrodin, all of us. I'm sure Tamiyo would be fascinated and Kaguya would be at home in the Tangle more than any Sylvok and you are going to tell the two of us everything Elspeth, I mean everything. We'll find a way to fix it together do you understand me; I said," he repeated, boring into her eyes with a harsh stare, "do you understand me?" Only when she nodded did he drop his tough attitude and step forwards, embracing the knight as hard as he could, "You call me a fool, and you're right to," she chuckled, her free arm around him as the other stayed clamped around the back of Koths' hand, "last thing you should be doing is taking after me - you're supposed to be the one with sense, use it in the future."

"I'll, try and remember that," she breathed, feeling like a terrible weight had been lifted from her shoulders, "we'll return to Mirrodin, we'll reforge it as it should be."

"We will," Koth assured her gently before looking to the door behind them, "come on, they're probably missing us and we don't need awkward questions now."

Typical ; despite himself Venser smiled as he saw the parchment unfurled over one of the desks; *give her a minute and she's making notes* ;

"That was fast," the artificer glanced over to see Vraska hailing him, the gorgon with her wounded leg resting on another chair to keep it straight, "perhaps it is for the best nothing could happen between us; I at least have an excuse for making reproduction swift." Nissa, sat on the table to give the gorgon's injured leg her seat as the two conversed, looked away with bitten lips as the artificer squared up to that challenge,

"Nothing to do with me I assure you, he's married and out of practice; ah, okay, okay," he always forgot exactly how long Koths' reach was, "that was below the belt, not somewhere you've been recentleee!"

"Please don't murder him, getting rid of the body would be time-consuming and tedious."

"The Swarm would have him"; *not helping Vraska* ; despite herself the knight smirked a little at the gorgons' offer, as did Koth as he finally let go of the suffering artificer's ear,

"How have those poor, uh, ladies not strangled you in your sleep yet?"

"Never met a soratami before Koth?" The Vulshok shook his head, "Well let me introduce you both, oh, just be aware," he lowered his voice, "Kaguya, the one with white eyes, it's nothing against you personally if she's very formal - it's not my place to say why but she has good reason." The two of Mirrodin shared a glance before nodding and the artificer smiled,

"Excellent, come on then; pull out a few extra chairs you lot, the old man needs to rest his weary bones…"

With tension eased and barriers broken the planeswalkers conversed and the gathering settled, so much so that the fourteenth arrival went virtually unnoticed until his whistle drew all ears,

"Well, this is a surprise," Naruto was stood in the doorway, Kurama still absent as either a fox or a book, "half of me was expecting blood on the floor."

"What…?"

"Don't ask," Chandra cut across Liliana's question, insides squirming with curious warmth as she recalled the images that had come from her asking that, "you won't like the answer. Are we there yet?"

"You still have no idea how a dramatic pause works do you? And no, not yet; I have to do this more carefully that I did on Ilyonde so it might take a minute, and don't worry," he glanced over at where Jace was regarding him earnestly, "I've got a crew on the deck making sure it goes back as it came out. You won't be able to see the join, and no-one can see us either."

"Thank all the gods, last thing I needed was more paperwork," the Guildpact grumbled before regarding the planesmaker again, "thought that's what I was going to ask, where did the sword come from? You didn't have it last time we saw you."

"Ah, yeah, that"; *this bodes ill* ; instinct told the Ravnican that kind of grin and the way Naruto was scratching the back of his head was likely the precursor to nothing good, "okay funny story. I, ah, kind of borrowed it when I was, uh, opening diplomatic channels with the, er, Phyrexians."

"The, it's a Mirrodin blade," Elspeth exclaimed, shooting to her feet, "they gave you it?"

"I borrowed, without asking," the shinobi explained delicately, "just as well or it might have put a kink in the negotiations. I was going to give it back, then I realised what it did; no chance after that, trust me I've met a more than a few people who'd end a plane to solve a problem."

"Naruto-san," it was Tamiyo who asked, the soratami looking somewhat worried as she remembered as few legends she'd investigated since her spark ignited, "what sword is it?"

"Uh, I can never remember; hang on they engraved it on the blade," before anyone could stop him he drew the short, ordinary-looking weapon, peering near the hilt, "Worldslayer."

"The *what?!* " Naruto looked over and couldn't help but chuckle,

"I shouldn't laugh but you look really funny with your hair stood on end," a few people snickered at the sight of the Vulshok's erect bristles but his eyes were fixed very firmly on the innocuous weapon,

"Just," he said gently, raising his hands, "put the sword down before anything… explodes."

"Nothing's going to explode; I do know what I'm doing, hard as that might be to believe," it wasn't possible for a Vulshok to blanche but as the lethal instrument from the legends of his world was casually swung in a small fist Koth came pretty close, "it's just, well; who doesn't like making boom every so often?"

"Dare I ask what it does?"

"Clue's in the title; when you absolutely, positively got to make an asteroid field except no freaking substitute," Naruto answered Gideons' question casually, seeing Jace turn as pale as the moonfolk he was sat opposite from, Tamiyo trembling as she clutched her scroll like a talisman and prayed, "still I never… well, once but I put it all back together when I was done," he assured them, sheathing the weapon to a collective sigh of relief, or disappointment from those

who considered themselves connoisseurs of boom, "and at least with me if it does slip it's more likely to blow up a world no-one's actually on. Still," there was a faint tremor, "touchdown - welcome home, weary travellers."

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 - Return to Ravnica

It didn't sink in at first, the whole idea that the entire trip might be ending outlandish until the one who'd brought them here spoke again,

"Don't go anywhere, I'll see you to the door, assuming you don't mind company Jace-san?"

"Company," the mind-mage repeated blankly before looking around and realising what he meant, "uh, no, no that'll be fine; can you…?"

"Have they ever stopped me before - seriously you need to get your security looked at," the shinobi told him before exploding into smoke, a plethora of orange in the Guildhall breaking apart, a copy of the planesmaker approaching each of those he'd affected by both his words and drawings, "no need for you to walk back this time - shunshin no jutsu!"

Technically it wasn't but Naruto had mastered the art of dropping into and out of the Eternities over short distances so well it made few odds. Each of the planeswalkers felt only a brief second of dislocation, a blurring around them before they were back on solid ground, bright sun and falling leaves around them, and the elves Auriea had once numbered amongst looking up from their labours in fright at the new arrivals,

"Just me," luckily Jace saw his staff first and stepped forwards with a smile, hoping this didn't start another rumour in the neighbourhood regarding his eccentricities, "thanks for all your help Elrith, Enor; take the rest of the day off, full pay." They didn't say no, circumventing the strange group and departing without another word in case he rescinded the offer as he breathed a low sigh of relief; *one knife dodged…* ;

"Won't they…?"

"Nah, everyone around here knows he's insane"; *… another knife landed, right in the shoulder blades* ; he spared his houseguest-cum-friend a nasty glare even as the Naruto that had transported him vanished in a plume of smoke, leaving only the real planesmaker standing with the 'walker he'd helped to move, holding Vraska's hand and looking mournful,

"I'm sorry, didn't know you couldn't be healed…"

"It's not a secret we share widely," the gorgon assured him, "you saved me and many others from the Azorius once and I suspect you've done more besides. I consider this a small price to pay."

"I said I'd wished I'd had someone like you when I was younger Vraska," the smaller beings' tone was soft as he allowed her symbiotes to flow around his arm, "I meant that sincerely. My plane, hell all planes are better for having people like you on them." The gorgon tasted his scent with her forked tongue as he stepped back and regarded them all,

"I regret what I did but I don't regret meeting any of you," he said sincerely, glancing from one familiar face to another, "if I had to I'd do it again unless I could think of a better way. I don't expect any of you to help me, you've got your own lives to lead but anything you choose to do I will be grateful for. If you want to drown Illustria in cockroaches be my guest, at least it's life."

"Nobody dare, that's my plane," Chandra said possessively before her gaze softened a little, "so after gate-crashing into our lives, re-writing everything we've ever known and making soft-core denouement models out of us, what next for you?"

"Denouement? Oh," he just caught Jaces' shake of the head, "well first of all I'm taking some of the proceeds of that denouement and treating myself to an all-I-can-eat slap up ramen binge, then it's back to the day-job. No rest for the wicked and all that; I'd best be off."

"Wait," he paused as the eldest planeswalker present pushed forwards, "before you disappear I've got a question."

"It was needed to take control of your debt; your bargains were sealed with your pain and only by your pain could I take them from the four and onto me. Luckily they left the nature of that pain up to me and I don't think anyone here would say you didn't deserve it - no offence but you're kind of a bitch in the same way water's kind of wet."

As soon as this is over I'm torturing something small, furry and helpless ; Liliana's face mottled, not helped by the choked snorts she could hear behind her as she added a few more names to her mental blacklist,

"It wasn't about that!"

"Really? I thought you'd be desperate to know why you got pan-handled," surprisingly it was Elspeth who cracked, the knight heaving with laughter and not able to face the necromancer as she shivered in barely-suppressed rage before breathing out a long, slow breath,

"No, I wanted to know two other things; firstly why did you give me back what you bartered for. I am grateful," she was quick to make that clear as his eyes hardened, "but why? If you needed help…"

"Because I know what it means to be bound to a fate you loathe; I was jinchuuriki, a human sacrifice and hated for it," Naruto said harshly, dulling her ire with his razor-sharp denunciations, "out of everyone you were by far and away the one I was most cautious of, not because of your age or power but because you made those deals of your own free will. There are none here who haven't known tragedy or mishap and paid for it but you willingly sold your soul - the last person I knew who took a bargain similar to your was my one-time best friend. I see a lot of him in you, or vice-versa given the age-gap; skilled, strong, of noble lineage and haunted by the past; but my sympathy for him ended with his hand buried in my chest and

me ascending into what I am now. Believe me, had you tried to fulfil the request I made of you on Ilyonde I would have ended you in an instant."

"Then," Lilianas' shame seared her anger away as her flaws were brutally laid bare, "why didn't you? You know what I am, what I've done…"

"But I don't and will never know what you will be; only you can decide that," Naruto broke in more gently, the necromancer jolting at the warmth of his hand as it took her slender one, "you made a choice on Ilyonde, a lot of others made choices there too. It was your plan that undid my aspect when the others gave you their mana and, even after that, you decided not to murder for power or to continue your life as Sasuke tried to end mine; for that, a chance to live once more seemed a fair bargain."

She swallowed but she would not cry; her restored soul was beating at the bars she now held it in but she did not heed it, not yet; there was something else gnawing at her, something she alone of the assembled should have had an inkling of and that she didn't was a constant, irritating torment; an itch she couldn't reach, a splinter she couldn't pull free,

"What was it like before?" He hadn't been expecting that and while he reeled she pressed on, trying to curry what favour she could, "I remember the Mending and before, when planeswalkers were as gods; I thought, we all thought there was nothing before and beyond that. Now you come along and resculpt history, saying there was a time before the Multiverse itself. You're not working blind Naruto, you must have a grand plan, an overall vision of what you're recreating; what did it look like," she was proud and she was haughty but her next words were likely the most sincere she'd spoken in many year as she faced the planesmaker fully,

"What was, or is the Universe?"

She could sense the question rippling behind her, the curiosity of the others awakened by her query and it seemed Naruto did as well, the planesmaker looking over her shoulder before letting her hand go and stepped backwards, a calculating look on his face as he talked half to himself,

"There's a reason they called one of the titans the Butcher of Truth you know; that was what he tried to show people, the way things used to be. Never ended well, but let me guess you all want to know right?" A quick swapping of glances brought a dozen nodding heads, "I think, yes, I can give you a glimpse, no more; I cannot show you all of it. Gather round," he backed up a few paces as they did so, the now-familiar ripples that broke up his blue eyes still perturbing to most but still, all would agree, infinitely preferable to what came next as he closed them and removed his headband. Only Liliana, who was closest still, noticed the strange crease that ran down his forehead before it split open, the sight making them all start but, more crucially, ensnaring them in the gaze of something else, something that began to swirl, the movements of its strange pattern dragging them all inwards. Unable and curiously unwilling to resist the flow as they were pulled, no, they were guided into its endless depths…

… straight back to the very garden on which they were stood before, nothing changed and not a hair out of place until the law of gravity was suddenly revoked.

In an instant the metropolis was a sea of greys, greens and browns under them, the instant after it was lost beneath a sea of wisping cloud. Those who thought they were within the Eternities were proven wrong as the curvature of a world appeared beneath them, the entire planet receding beneath them as other phenomenon rushed past; a spray of rocks, another sphere, dwarfing the other as Ravnica disappeared, gone into the distance beyond their sight.

All scale was lost, random pieces and sights flying past until, at length, a pattern emerged, a large tendril of blues and purples studded with flawless, beautiful jewels, the light of countless suns

and as they rose still further even that became part of something else, something greater; a disc. A great shining circle of slow, ordered chaos slowly rotated in the eternal blackness and even that was shrinking, the lifting from beneath not stopping as behind and around the shrinking circlet other lights were seen. As the mass containing Ravnica was lost to distance more and more of its distant cousins were revealed, the blackness alive like a cloudless night sky, specks of dust scattered across the cosmos. Even as the pushing from beneath faded and they were held aloft for an instant Narutos' words came back to them, whispered across the void of time and space…

… this is but a glimpse…

."..and no more."

He was looking away from them all, pulling the armoured cloth back down over his, his whatever he had as those released from it gasped, some staggering as they tried to absorb even some of what it had revealed. He waited, patient, rubbing a spot of grease off his former mark of allegiance and not regarding them until eventually the silence was broken,

"It," Nissa stuttered, her eyes wet even as the memory began to fade, trying to hold onto it like snatching at mist, only a vague impression left, "you would remake - no, that cannot be done, not by a thousand, a thousand-thousand…" Naruto's chuckle cut her off,

"Funny thing about the impossible; it always seems that way until you've done it then you wonder what all the fuss was about. I once thought it was impossible to throw a kunai straight; every time I tried I still thought it was impossible, then I hit the bull's-eye one time and I'd done it. Every journey seems forever; you take a step and it still seems forever, you take another, and another, and another and before you know it you're where you want to be. Like learning a spell, mastering a kata, growing a garden or raising a hearth and home the road goes ever on and on, but you can pick up some useful things along the way."

"Like?"

"Anything," Naruto shrugged at Koth's croaked question, tapping the hilt of his sword, "a useful tool," he patted his other hip, absent its usual burden, "a good friend, happy memories, sadder memories, plane-shaking secrets, useless trivia; everyone learns as they go. For instance before today I never knew how sensitive elven ears were, or how flexible a tied-up soratami could be…" Tamiyo coloured and laughed together, dabbing her eyes even as she refused to reach for her parchment and ink; some things could never be properly recorded, ."..or just how much I hate trinary stars. My apologies but here we must part ways; that ramen binge is going to have to go on hold for a minute - there's been a cock-up."

"How bad - can we help?"

"Eh, no, I'll handle it, my clones messed up again," he sighed, waving off Gideons' concern as his form beginning to effervesce, the Blind Eternities opening behind him, "you'd think they, or I would've learned by now. Oh well, one more step along the road I go; maybe this time I'll master five-dimensional thinking; good luck to all of you, wherever you go from here - we'll meet again if you want us to."

He stepped through the portal and was gone, arguably the most powerful being in the Multiverse leaving those who had thought they had a claim on that title behind. All remained where they were, lost in their thoughts and trying to recall the glimpse they had seen in his strange, terrible eye but none, not even Jace, could truly fix it in his mind. The mind-mage was, however, the first to recover, his past experience with the planesmaker giving him an idea of what to do next; he was halfway to his door with his key in hand when someone noticed his absence,

"Where are you going?"

"To my cellar"; Vraska's brow furrowed,

"Why?"

"Alcohol," he called back, fitting his key into the lock, "copious amounts of it."

"Of course," remembering the last time they'd met the planesmaker Chandra followed him, glancing over her shoulder as she did so, "anyone helping; we got wine, ale and that mushroom slop he goes through."

"I'm sorry, we have?"

"Yes, we - some of that wine I brought."

"Two bottles odd," the mind-mage grumbled through a slight smile, "everyone wait here, I'll bring some of it out."

"We do not…"

"Now's a good time to start," Chandra cut down the taller moonfolks' protests, "trust me when Naruto's part of the equation the answer always involves booze and-stroke-or violence!"

"Interesting, I had a similar theory about pyromancers," Gideon smirked before frowning severely at her answering gesture, "don't swear; she's got more than enough bad habits already."

"Not yet she doesn't," Chandra's grin was wicked as she looked down at the hieromancers' new daughter, "tell me Kiora, did Gideon ever tell you how we met…?"

On a balmy summer day in the city of guilds after a council, a minor war and a revelation thirteen planeswalkers were gathered together in a single garden, taking stock and simply talking, about the day, the battles they'd taken part in and, as more alcohol was delved from the cellar and familiarity bred fellowship, other stories came to light. Revelations of the planesmaker and those who knew and had met him before, the admissions tinged with humour as hindsight brought different views to what had been excruciating circumstances. History

was recounted, though as Venser stole his companions' calligraphy brush with a promise that if she complained he'd break the story of Splay-Paws' best trap it went unrecorded save to memory even if, as the sun sank lower and a pervading chill made most of them retreat indoors, Tamiyo eventually told that humiliating tale herself after the Koth, Elspeth and Vensers' thrilling account of some of the days of the Phyrexian war,

"I have never been so embarrassed," the moonfolk admitted, usually chalk skin tinged pink as she took another sip of wine, "even more so since Venser was, incapacitated and could not cut the snare."

"What happened to you?"

"I couldn't breathe," the sojourner admitted, trying not to laugh even now, "it was just the yelp she made. Right after the rat left she took a step forwards; whoosh, into the air by her ankle. Parchment everywhere, ink over her face, kimono askew - where's that stone?"

"You will not dare!" Tamiyo denounced him fiercely, "You do and I will, I will hire a true nezumi to deal with you!"

"And we wonder where he got his ideas from?" Garruk grimaced, looking into the ridiculously tiny glass he was delicately holding before a feral cunning gleamed in his eyes, "What about you; were you panned in his book?"

"No I was not!" Liliana declared, knocking back the rest of her drink having been quiescent for most of the evening, "And just for the record Viviana Less is one of the most popular characters; a princess smart enough to trick her kidnappers, get back her magic and escape from them - then she runs into the blundering Tarrut Wildshrieker and it all goes downhill."

"You really did your research - closet fan," the look the geomancer was given should have shrivelled him to rust but he refused back down, "you'd not be the first to have hate bloom to respect, especially on the battlefield." Nissa scowled at the sly dig, topping up

her mushroom wine; everyone had chuckled at her admission of what Mel had done to her but then everyone had taken their turn on the ducking stool and, to her surprise, she found shame shared was a much lighter burden than that held within; *though that doesn't make it painless, or beyond the reach of vengeance* ;

"At least it wasn't love on there," she shot back, Koth wincing he conceded the blow before another voice cut in, Chandra poking her head in from outside, a hint of fire around her hair keeping out the chill of the fallen night as her expression told of horror,

"Damn it we forgot those books, they're at the Guildhall still! Jace for the love of the gods tell me there's no-one there tomorrow!"

"There is but," the Guildpact raised a finger to forestall the coming riot, "the, ah, 'Herotica' pre-releases aren't; I can only assume Naruto picked them all up as he delivered us here."

"Where are they now?"

"Where do you think Chandra?" The mind-mage redirected Koths' question with a smirk, "Where would you put volumes such as that?"

"How would I… oh he didn't?"

"Afraid so, your shelf just got a lot fuller."

"He is a complete git," the firebrand declared, the denunciation undone by her smile as she thought about the library above them and the texts she had helped fill it with, "ah well, at least my denouements outnumber his."

"Denouements?"

"What she calls novels," Jace explained to the confused-looking Venser, "since we were, or should I say since Naruto forced his way into our lives Chandra's been busy hunting him down…"

"Yeah but that's boring," the firebrand complained, coming inside and squeezing past Garruk, the beastmage closest to the door, "I want to hear something fun; what were you going to tell us about the temple earlier Gideon, before Kiora put the brakes on your womanising?" The hieromancer glared as several people looked away, Venser the most obviously affected,

"I admire your sacrifice Jura, I truly do; as my good friend over there discovered a while ago as soon as kids come into the picture your love-life goes straight out of it."

"If you want to kill him feel free," the Vulshok grated, glowering, "I might even give you a hand."

"I'd take the offer Gideon, I've seen what those hands can do; I'll read about what they can do later"; *I'm feeling exceptionally picked on* ; despite himself though Koth couldn't help but smile a little - it was more than the drink and the unusual food, Jace having kindly opened his larder as well as his cellar as the day wore on, it was the company, the people who'd stood shoulder to shoulder with him just as it had been when hell was knocking at their door during the Mirran fight back against the praetors, "still, what were you saying about Ula's temple?" The light mage opened his mouth then paused, smiling,

"I hope you know Kiora might kill me for this…"

"Not until tomorrow Jura-san," said a soft, musical voice from the hallway, Kaguya regarding him softly with a delicate hand around the shoulders of another, "for now story time is over for one of us."

"I'm not tired."

"If Elspeth-san had not caught you you would have toppled from that chair," the soratami gently overran the protests of the child she was guiding, "you have the heart of ten samurai but the body of only one - you must rest."

"Was'a sammeri?"

"Later," Gideon assured his new charge, looking outside and starting, "didn't realise it was so late. Is there a place we can stay around here?"

Even as he made to ask the question Jace chortled, a distinct feeling of déjà-vu in his mind as he looked over the assembled as saw the deep blue sky overhead; *as before, so again, though this time there's more than just the one stray to take in. Not that it was a bad thing* ; he flicked a glance towards the firebrand, wondering if she was thinking the same thing he was,

"Not this evening; Kiora do you sleep underwater?"

"If I can," she answered, drowsiness banished momentarily by the question, "why?"

"Well there's a water-butt outside - I'm joking," it was funny to see her fins flare like a startled cat but he hastily overrode both her concerns and those of the man now taking a very close interest in his words, "I've a bath upstairs you're welcome to, hot water and all."

"Really? Thanks, I'm getting kind of dry, not been under all day." Gideon cleared his throat, bracing himself to act as the villain again,

"My thanks for the offer Jace but we can't impose; we'll find our own lodgings."

"Can't," the Ravnican snorted, looking up at the taller man, "a word I've become reticent to use recently, along with impossible. Think about what we've done in the last day, all of you; we called a council without bloodshed, fought a gods-damned war; hell we repeated something from the annals of legend, literal legend," one of the crowd glanced away at the reminder, the mind-mage inadvertently grinding salt into a recent wound, "and discovered, well, we were offered a chance to… I don't know, help repopulate creation? We

managed all that, I'm sure we can all fit under one roof without murder being done in the night."

"Or worse, if someone gets hold of one of those novels," Venser chipped in, grinning at the groans, "hey, it could be the next best-seller and there are worse things to be remembered for. If you're offering a bed Jace I won't say no, I'm too refined a vintage to go gallivanting off after a day like today."

"You don't look that old."

"I'm well-preserved."

"Certainly well-pickled," Koth cut in, eyeing the bottles around where his friend was sat, "still it is a long way to Mirrodin and I told Nurthu I might be a few days. I can't rest on your beds though; I need a hard surface, no blankets."

"I have a cellar."

"Stone floor yeah?" Jace nodded, "Perfect; now put the fleck to bed before she falls over."

"I won't," Kiora told the geomancer, though she was unable to stop her yawn as her guardian came over, thanking Kaguya for looking after her with the others as he led the mergirl gently towards the stairs, the soratami watching them go; *so strong for such a small one, and noble of him to guard her* . She was so lost in thoughts of how her family might have been she almost missed the sigh behind her, Chandra with her hands on her hips as she looked past the moonfolk,

"No prizes for guessing who I'm bunking with - better get some blankets down, I don't think Cuddles' leg is up to stairs yet." Garruk coughed, amused,

"Cuddles?" *Oops* ;the firebrand slapped a palm to her face as she realised her admission,

"She's going to kill me; all right," having a clean conscience had worked before, "we 'walk a lot together, Vraska suffers the cold, the nights are cold, I'm warm - I'm sure you can draw the rest yourselves."

"And if we cannot I know one who can," Nissa put in, smirking, "it sounds an excellent sequel - *Snake and Fire?* "

" *Chill and Flame?* "

"I hate you all."

" *Warmth and Tenderness?* " Venser half-drowned in his drink,

"You need to warn us before you come out with something like that Tami-san," the soratami should have been annoyed as he used her detested short name but was too at peace to feel it, instead nodding as he wiped droplets of wine off his face as the target of their jibes scowled at the lot of them,

"If you're not careful it'll be *Rip and Tear* and it'll involve all you sods," Chandra threatened, "as opposed to just me when Vras finds out I let that slip."

"She'll not kill you."

"You'd be amazed what the Golgari can have you live through," the pyromancer riposted the elementalists' assertion with a shiver, "still, best wait for Gideon to get back - I'd like to hear one last story before I meet my untimely and doubtless agonising demise."

"Thanks, that's just right."

"No need to thank me," Jace assured his guest as Kiora withdrew her fingers from the filled vessel, "it'll get colder though."

"Just like home," she said fondly, the mind-mage pausing as she hugged him briefly, "thanks anyway, even if you don't want them." Despite himself the Ravnican smiled as she slipped away, glancing up at the man filling the doorway behind him,

"You realise she's going to be a heart-thief?"

"Don't, just don't," Gideon groaned, "I'll tell you when you're older, a lot older," the hieromancer assured the confused mergirl, Jace squeezing past him as he stepped forwards and embraced the one-time irritation that had become a pearl in his heart, mind and soul, "have a good night, we're heading to Zendikar in the morning."

"Why? Fond of the place?"

"It grew on me," Gideon admitted before turning a little more severe, "but also we, both of us, need to follow the rules - blood has a stronger claim than any other."

"Blood, but I," understanding flashed in her eyes, "my mother? But she, and none of my school need me - they think…"

"I think a woman who'd abandon everything for her child is a woman who should know that child is safe and well."

"But I told her I was swimming away; she, didn't want me to go but it was best…"

Neither of the new family saw Jace edge away, knocking the door shut behind him to grant them privacy; *have to tell the others to use downstairs.* He was quite surprised how deeply their interplay had touched him, a sudden warmth flooding through him as his sharp intellect cut to another point; *and it only, or most likely happened because of the planesmaker. How much does he actually see and what was that strange, eye, for want of a better word, he hid under…*
;

"Jace?" The sudden voice broke his chain of thought and he leapt up as though scalded, whipping around to see the owner of the voice with, if not contempt, then certainly standoffishness in his voice,

"What is it Vess?" She glared, her eyes alive with that dangerous blend of spite and allure that had ensnared him once before but time had dulled its cutting edge, allowing him to weather it until she unexpectedly looked away,

"I need you to help me with something."

"I've heard that before."

"I'm serious," and she was, he could tell from the slight tremor in both her frame and her voice, "have I put a foot wrong in your house, didn't I…?"

"Spare our lives? Spare me," the mind-mage spat, ushering her down the hallway so their whispered conversation was out of earshot of the bathroom, "you gave up; the rest of us living or dying played no part in that decision. You made it for your best interests like every other decision you've ever taken."

"What do you want, an apology? A tear-jerking begging to be taken back in," she spread her arms, looking upwards as though inviting salvation, "send down an angel, let me confess my sins. It won't happen and you know it as well as I do; as I told that sun mage I am what I am and I won't be pitied or patronised for it." The Ravnican snorted,

"You're certainly whole again; ready to take another gamble for immortality? What will you sacrifice this time - even demons would be hard-pressed to find your heart." Shadows covered her face, crawled in her hair before, to his slight surprise, vanishing; Liliana again looked, if not beaten, then certainly discomforted as she stepped back down the darkened landing,

"Never again, I'll not serve another master no matter how tempting the bargain," she swallowed harshly before looking at him again and Jace was amazed to see tears glistening in her eyes, "even I can learn that much."

"So what do you want from me?" His tone was softer now, though still firm, something that drew a small smile from the necromancer before she looked away; in the past she had hurt him terribly, she had no right to ask him anything but at the same time if there was a chance he could let her see what she was missing she had to take it,

"When I was, lost," she began, "you don't know what it was like, you'll never know. I was trapped, a prisoner behind my own eyes - I've been close to death before but that was the first time his shadow looked more inviting than carrying on. Even when I try to remember it's like… I can see everything I did but that's all; when you all focussed your mana through me I can't even explain what happened, what I saw. It's in my head, I can see it but I can't touch it - Naruto said you and the hot-head knew some of his burden and with that so do I. To know something so perfect and have it so far away," she clenched her fists, so lost to her loss and Jace so absorbed in her story neither of them heard or saw Gideon leave the bathroom and then slink away, recognising something between them he had no place in, "it's torture, like being blind and given a glimpse of the world only to be returned to darkness. I need to know more than what I saw," more than her ripped dress or her tangled hair, the sight of outright pleading in her expression undid most of his resistance; not even she could fake sincerity that well, "if you want me to beg I'll beg on my knees here and now but, please Jace, give me the meaning to what I saw."

He could, perhaps should have said no; it would be fitting for her to know what it meant to have something you thought was your last hope turn its back and walk away. How delicious would it be to leave a knife in the heart of his former backstabber, to have her cast aside her vaunted pride, crawl like a worm and then simply step over her and he was tempted; the bad blood between them wasn't easily

forgotten. But she had saved them, Naruto's aspect could not have been undone by any save her and she had foregone her own life to spare all of them, and more than that the mind-mage was tired of nursing old grudges, picking at old wounds; he wanted to let go, move forwards and out of her shadow,

"With this our business is done Liliana," he stepped forwards, the dark mage catching her breath, "we are neutral, strangers to each other. We do not speak of the past, it never existed do you understand?" She nodded, hardly daring to speak and trying to calm her mind as her one-time lover stepped forwards, a trace of blue upon his fingertip; it rose, there was contact and there was then nothing beyond the memory.

Liliana had felt the mind-mages' magic before though never in anger; for her his touch always been gentle as opposed to the brute-force destruction she knew he could cause. He had cared for her, so naively she'd at first been secretly scornful, then somewhat touched but petty feelings had never come between her goals and his strength and control had only grown since then, so much so that she didn't realise the awful truth until he lowered his hand, the blue mana fading,

"I'm sorry," she had to look away and he gave her privacy; he could only see what she had seen, there was no feeling behind it for him to extrapolate so for both of them it had been like watching an enthralling picture show; *but she lived it, she was within the mana itself. That I can't replicate without feeling, and neither can she* ; though impartial by necessity of his new role within the city of Guilds Jace wasn't heartless - the necromancer had come within, no she had seen beyond mana to the truth behind, something perhaps even Naruto didn't know and that was all she could remember, the sight of it, not the effect it should have had on her mind. *A dreadful loss* ; he should have detested her, instead he commiserated; *to be enlightened and not know what that means - heart-rending, especially as even together we couldn't do… couldn't?* ; a sudden thought seized the mind-mage as Liliana regained her composure,

"Erase them," she asked softly, "better to not have a sight than be tortured by it. Remove them Jace, please; I've no right to ask you but would you help a suffering stranger?"

"No."

"So you learned to be cruel," her smile was bitterly sad, "I taught you too well as well."

"And you didn't heed your lessons well enough, and you were the one who asked to be shown"; *what?* ; her confusion must have shown through her watering eyes as Jace regarded her, "you've already done the impossible once, what's stopping you doing it again?"

"Impossible? What, that spell!" He nodded and she was left grasping for speech, "But I…"

"Have a long road ahead of you but, like Naruto, you can see what lies at the end of it," the Ravnican finished for her, smiling slightly, "you can treat it as a torture or use it as inspiration to see it again properly. You'll need to learn the different colours of mana though, and how to channel them all."

"That will take years, decades," it had taken a long time to master the mana of the swamps even with infernal aid; *but he's right - I've done it before, I know it can be done* ; "and I've other things to do first."

"Don't we all? I cannot and will not tell you what to do Liliana; I don't waste breath; but you've a second chance, don't squander it. Also, if you run into an empty plane on your travels it might not be a bad idea to liven it up somehow, ironic though that might be for a death mage," she snickered slightly despite herself as Jace folded his arms, trying and somewhat failing to look severe, "and if you come back to Ravnica at all remember the procedures for meeting the Guildpact - Lavinia gets very upset when people try to circumvent protocol."

"Upsetting young ladies," she smirked, her voice low, "an unfortunate habit with you Jace Beleren," the mind-mage quirked an eyebrow until she gestured behind him; someone else was at the head of the stairs watching them both and his pulse raced as he realised what she was seeing,

"Chandra…"

"We've sorted out the sleeping," her expression was somewhere between stoicism, resignation and heartbreak and he never wanted to see her wear it again, "you can catch up when you're ready."

"We were…"

."..becoming strangers to each other," Liliana's formal tone made him look back at her, trying frantically to disassemble her game before it did any further harm, "I've a lot of old ghosts to lay to rest but I'm not in the habit of apologising, especially not in public. Goodbye Jace, it'll be a long time before we meet again."

She stepped past, the Ravnican so flabbergasted he forgot to say anything as she sashayed down the short corridor. He did see Chandra regarding her approach impassively, the firebrand not backing down an inch even as Liliana paused alongside her and leant in; crimson and black hair overlapped for a brief instant before the fire mages' eyes went wide,

"Really?"

"Worse than tangle-wire"; Jace had a sudden sinking feeling as his housemate glanced at him quizzically before remembering something and turning back to the shadowmancer,

"You're bunking in my room; yes you are, don't argue. Trust me the inn down the road is a complete dive even I wouldn't be caught dead in." Liliana might have wanted to argue but thought better of it; instead Jace caught the very edge of her smirk as he followed in her

wake, cursing the witch's' name; how long had that pledge of strangers lasted?

"Dare I ask what she said?" The pyromaster regarded him with a contradictory look, as though she were drawing a conclusion that, though amusing, was still somewhat questionable,

"Tangle wire?" She suddenly snorted, "Actually yeah, I can see it."

"Chandra, Chan-damn it," she was just too quick, her arm slipping from his grip as she descended in the necromancers' wake, echoing her smirk; *damn it, they're going to drive me mad! Oh well, she'll get hers tomorrow when the rest have gone…*

If I make it to tomorrow I'll be very, very grateful ;

"Oh come on, it was an honest mistake," the flat, accusing gaze didn't change, the fact its owner was prostrate on the living room floor not toning down its potency, "I didn't mean to do it, just a slip of the tongue." The gorgon continued giving her the evil eye for a moment before she mercifully looked away,

"I suppose it couldn't be helped; I know how slippery your tongue can be."

"Vraska!" Golgari humour cut to the quick, "That, urgh; and we've got company!"

"I'm hardly a blushing maiden, Venser saw to that," Elspeth told the slightly younger woman, meticulously folding up her tunic atop the armour she'd placed in one of the lounge seats following doffing it, "I put up with far worse from him during the battle for Mirrodin and Koths' compound keeps trying to set me up with others of their tribe. They're a passionate people the Vulshok, you and your tongue would get on well with them."

"You two are no friends of mine," the pyromancer declared, trying to scowl over her smile, "if you wake up wondering what the burning smell is don't expect me to put you out."

"Fortunately I don't burn easily," the gorgon reminded her, throwing off the covers as both other women stepped closer, glancing at each other before Chandra approached first,

"I'll be in the middle, I'm more used to this," she lay down next to the gorgon, not reacting as the symbiotes flowed over her, attracted to her warmth, "don't worry Elspeth, my body is a shield between you and the terrible tentacle-monster; that didn't come out right. Say nothing, we'll never speak of it again."

"I certainly hope not," the white mage looked over the two of them half-amused, half-concerned, "you, ah, do this often?"

"Especially if the nights are cold," Vraska said, glancing up at her, "it is one of the greatest fears of my kind; the death-slumber has taken many of us."

"If they're like you that's a terrible shame," Elspeth regarded the prone gorgon fondly, "how's your leg?"

"It itches but I should be able to hobble tomorrow."

"If you can't you stay here another night," Chandra told her, feeling Elspeth slide under their shared covers, the floor beneath them hard but blocked out by a thicker blanket under them all, "everyone comfortable?" Elspeth nodded,

"Mirrodin's made of metal; I've had far harder floors - it's Koth I feel sorry for when he's off his plane. He can't sleep on anything softer than granite - what's so funny?" She felt the blanket shake, Chandra trying to hold in a sudden bout of giggles,

"He's married isn't he?"

"Compounded, it means more or less the same thing"; the fire-mage shook harder, a quaver of mirth in her voice,

"Brings a whole new meaning to the phrase break the bed - if he comes down covered in rock dust you know he's had a good night." Elspeth snorted, nudging the other woman with her elbow,

"Don't be vulgar, and more importantly hope Nurthu never finds out about today; if she discovers you propositioned her compound I wouldn't give a copper bit to your chances of escaping alive." The blanket sloughed away as Chandra scrambled to sit up, regarding the smirking knight with horror,

"What; I'd never… !"

"Give it to me Koth," Elspeth mimed, Chandra's jaw dropping before her palm covered her forehead, "she hears about that and the only thing between you and a painful end is a good head-start."

"I could just burn your tongue off you know?"

"With those cheeks I don't doubt it - alright," she held up a hand as Chandra glared volcanically, trying to cool her furious blush, "I'm sorry but it's funny when you look back."

"I'm sure I'll laugh one day," the fire mage muttered, flumping back down, "can I rely on your silence or am I doomed to death by a jealous wife?"

"Your secret's safe with me."

"Good; now assuming everything's equal and no-one's going to take any more jabs at my pride good night; I'm tired and I'll see you both in the morning."

With that she fell silent, Elspeth rolling over to give her back to the other woman and staring at the far wall, realising as she did that if Vraska feared the cold she'd been wise in her choice of bed-partner;

though I suppose it's to be expected from a red mage. Is she asleep already? ; a strange noise, like a stuttering, whistling hiss pierced the silence, the knight cocking an ear and wondering if the gorgon had already succumbed before the body beside her shifted again,

"Bloody worm-head," there was a noise suspiciously like knuckles hitting snake-skin before the blanket sloughed away, Chandra sitting up again, "sorry Elspeth - we're even now right?"

"Right," Vraska replied, snickering as the fire mage stood up and stepped over her; Elspeth heard the lounge door swish open a few seconds later and looked over at the gorgon questioningly, "her ears link directly to her bladder." Elspeth was confused for a second before hastily stifling a snort,

"That's cruel," she declared, realising the purpose of the gorgons' hiss, "amusing but cruel."

"We Golgari are fond of passive revenge," the bland statement didn't help the white mage hold down her laughter, Elspeth just about managing to control her snickering as the pyromancer reappeared, a flaming orb above her to make sure she didn't tread on them; *even if I owe Cuddles a swift kick. I'll get her later* ; retaking her place, wishing all a good night and punching the smug walking wallet one last time Chandra snuffed out her flame and lay back, waiting for sleep to take her.

She had the strangest sensation of being rocked, then a dim pain blossomed in her shin; fortunately Chandra had never been a heavy sleeper and quickly rose through the mist of slumber, her journey guided by pain and sounds of struggle nearby. There was an instant of confusion as she opened her eyes to darkness, hearing only stifled snatches of breath and another impact on her leg before she quickly reached forwards, throwing an arm over the shaking figure and whispering fiercely,

"Shhh, shhh, it's alright," the thrashing didn't lessen so she clung on, speaking in an undertone calmly, "relax, relax, you're all right, shhh. Are you awake?" The convulsing had stopped but the shivering continued, her arm overlaid by another as she sensed something in the darkness move,

"Yes," the firebrands' chest constricted; that wasn't the voice of the knight she'd lain down beside, it was trembling, as tremulous as hers had once been as Elspeth breathed in ragged, harsh rasps,

"In-two-three, out-two-three," Chandra soothed, pulling herself in closer to the suffering woman, remembering how important human contact had been for her, "slow and gentle, just catch your breath - you're safe." She heard the knight move, felt hands on her arm as slowly her breathing calmed, though she still shivered as though stuck by a bad flux; fortunately the firebrand couldn't smell anything other than sweat from the leaving nightmare,

"I'm sorry, I'll sleep elsewhere."

"You won't, I've had the terrors before; come with me. Don't worry about Vras, she sleeps like a log," even as she spoke she felt symbiotes slowly slither off her back, the gorgon's breathing unchanged as she faked the sleep she'd been woken from; as she had confided in Chandra she no longer dreamed and was easily spooked awake, "once she's gone she's gone until sun-up. Come on, up you get," Chandra rose to all fours, then her knees, helping Elspeth to her feet and steadying her as she swayed, "we'll talk in the kitchen, no-one's sleeping there."

Steadily and with a small ribbon of fire making sure they didn't trip over the reposing Golgari they made their way through the silent house, distant snores the only noise as Chandra pulled out a stool and eased her friend into it. Igniting her hair for light and to take the edge from the chill the firebrand couldn't help but wince at Elspeths' gaunt appearance; it seemed all vitality had been leached from her face to leave a hollow, sunken skull that regarded her through haunted eyes. *Damn it, what did Gideon do when it was me?* ; she

could barely remember those memories now so went with her gut, shocked at how cold the other womans' hands were as she took them gently in her own,

"I dreamt of fire," she admitted slowly, hearing the screams from her burning village, her family condemned to the flames for her mistake by soldiers serving a supposed higher purpose, "sometimes I wish I'd died, that the spark hadn't saved me."

"I wish I'd not been born," Elspeth matched her confession with her own, "even now it won't stop, I can still hear them. I, we won but I fought too late; I'm no knight, I've no honour, don't deserve any."

"Shh," Chandra told her, biting her cheek to stop herself tearing up at the wrenching laments, "don't talk like that. You fought and you won, hell you broke that darksteel stuff Koth said couldn't be broken." Elspeth sniffed, then laughed wretchedly,

"Even a shattered blade can murder the innocent."

"You couldn't."

"You don't know me."

"I know you enough to know that," Chandra said fiercely, crackling hair reflected in Elspeths' tear-stained eyes, "I heard you - I don't know what Spikes was on about with Yawgmoth but you swore to defend Koth's daughter. He told us about her, what did Naruto have to do with it?"

"You know of Yawgmoth - Phyrexia and the Dominarian war?"

"Vaguely yes but he's been dead a long time; I remember you and Koth and that artificer told us they were reborn on Mirror-wherever and you beat them."

"We beat nothing," the realisation was surprisingly bitter, even that faint pride extinguished by the planesmasters' words, "Naruto

removed them, without him we'd have lost. Whatever he did created Tiszta and when we fought and he told us I, I couldn't take it. I lost one plane I loved, I couldn't lose Mirrodin; Jace, he showed me memories," it had been one of the more disjointing things to reconcile; once she'd had time to think she recognised every memory the mind-mage had duplicated and compressed into that trial, in effect living them twice, "and I, tried to kill her."

"Who, Tiszta? You thought she was Phyrexian?"

"She's a child," the knight hissed, her tone thick with hatred for herself, "even the most honourless dog of Bant wouldn't harm the defenceless and I wanted her dead! I'm no better than the bastard Phyrexians, a scabied dog has…"

The slap echoed softly but it still echoed around the still kitchen, Elspeth bringing a hand to her stinging cheek as Chandra glared, her gaze steely,

"Say that again and I'll really lose my temper," the fire mage threatened, "did you kill her?"

"What?"

"Tiszta, in your mind - did you kill her?"

"I, no," guilt swamped the pain, "I couldn't."

"Would a Phyrexian have even paused?" Elspeth's working jaw gave her the answer, "Do you think you're a goddess Elspeth?" The sun mage recoiled,

"Of course not!"

"Then stop thinking like you should be one," Chandra drove over her denials, "sometimes we get our choices wrong, welcome to life. You make mistakes, you're human - what you do wrong doesn't matter as much as how you put it right. Listen, I was stupid and reckless when

I was younger - I almost ended up using one of the most destructive spells I knew back then to get rid of a pursuit in the middle of a crowded street. If Gideon hadn't been there; yeah, I knew him back then, apart from Jace who I'd had one fight with he was the only 'walker I'd ever really met; I shudder to think what the death toll would have been. Once I realised and he told me what I'd nearly done I swore to reign it in; next time I had a choice between fighting people I'd pissed off or getting innocent people killed I went quietly - I wouldn't put them at risk. What about you Elspeth, why did you fight on Mirrodin," a sudden suspicion seized the pyromancer and she crossed her fingers hard, hoping she was doing the right thing, "was it because of the other plane?"

The white mage was rocking on her seat, shivering so hard Chandra almost missed her nod,

"Bant," she managed to croak, "I found peace there; it took me in and trained me, made me a knight but when it needed me," she looked up, the agony in her face so vivid Chandra's harshness collapsed and she hugged the other woman again, conveying her support through the most basic and visceral human contact, "I couldn't do it. I found out later the plane, Alaria, was fractured into shards, Bant was one of them; at the conflux they merged again and Bant was invaded by the shard of death and destruction. We fought and we lost, they overwhelmed us and when the spires fell I lost control, wiped out their forces and returned my squire to life, forbidden. When the battle was done I left, I didn't try to restore what had been; I couldn't face the hope I saw in their eyes when they looked at me. Koth found me later, well, we found each other in the gladiator pits of Urborg," somehow a laugh bubbled up from within, "no love on that battlefield. I followed him; after we found Venser we went to Mirrodin and I fought, reluctantly at first, called a coward with good reason until I found fighting meant I couldn't see Bant any more."

"And when the war was over you started thinking about it again didn't you? You idiot," Chandra squeezed the knight hard as she felt her

nod, "we're all idiots, me with my fire, you with a death-wish, Jace gets obsessed to the point of madness and I dread to think what some of the others have wrong with them. You're just lucky we caught this before it was too late." Elspeth caught her breath, pushing out of the pyromancers' embrace to regard her,

"Too late?" Chandra nodded sadly,

"I lived under this roof on and off for over half a year before Jace and I properly spoke about anything and we only did that after we were in a worse state than we are now. He nearly broke his mind and I nearly broke my will because something - pride, stupidity, fear I don't know - stopped either of us opening our mouths. It's pathetic now I look back but I don't look back beating myself up; I either laugh or think how the hell do I or we make sure we don't end up in that mess again. It's a problem with the spark; sometimes it's easier to run from or bury things you should say or do." The knight looked at her for a long moment before looking down, regarding her knees and speaking,

"I see your point," Chandra resisted the urge to hiss in triumph, "I ran, have been running forever, by the sigils I'm tired. I'll hold to my oaths for Melira, and little Tiz if she takes up the blade, help Koth and the others reforge Mirrodin now Yawgmoths' pets are gone; after that I don't know, I'll…"

"After that," the pyromancers' voice cut over her but Chandra herself seemed far away, Elspeth regarding her curiously as she suddenly snapped back to reality, her eyes as alight as her hair, "Elspeth tell me about Bant - don't say it's gone, tell me about the place."

"It was," having spent so much time trying not to remember her former home she had to think hard, "it was, unique; there was no red or black mana there. It was peaceful, with fields and, and rolling hills; they were gentle, perfect for riding on. I stayed in the barracks or monasteries a lot…"

"Wait there," Chandra slipped off her seat and darted away, the glowing trail of her fire fading with the distance. Elspeth heard her swiftly ascend the stairs before catching her breath, rubbing her arms; without the firebrand there was a definite chill in the air; *I can only hope Vraska's not suffering* . She stood to get a glass of water, the liquid chilling her further but washing away some of the tightness in her throat. Swilling down the last of the drink she drained the glass just as she caught a glimpse of orange, turning as Chandra reappeared looking serious but somewhat elated,

"I don't want to rake up old bones but do you think if you went back to Bant, or whatever it is now, there'd be anything left? Anyone who'd follow you, anything you'd want to save?"

"I," it was such an emotive question she couldn't answer it, "I don't know, why?"

"Find out," Chandra's voice was soft but with an undercurrent of excitement as she offered something forwards; at first Elspeth thought it was one of the damned novels that had started this whole thing until she saw the cover was blank, "after you reforge Mirrodin you can remake it." Hope rose before she could control it; it took a lot of effort to squash down,

"It's gone Chandra, the conflux destroyed it."

"So make somewhere new, somewhere better; this is one of mine," the red mage claimed, trying hard not to sound proud as she held out her book, "it's actually the reason I know the planesmaker at all; I found it before I even knew who Naruto was. It's a plane near Zendikar; Kiora or Nissa or I could 'walk you there blindfolded, I called it Illustria. It's empty Elspeth, a blank slate," she pressed it into the knights' hands, feeling none of the reluctance she'd feared as she felt the other womans' cold fingers close over it, "it'll take time and a lot of effort but you can rebuild Bant; Naruto said he won't mind what goes on his planes as long as something does. Keep that book, it's alright," Chandra embraced the other woman again, her

last words a soft whisper, "you can cry if you want to, I'm the last person who'd judge you."

Teardrops dotted the denouements' front cover as she held one hand around Elspeths' back, the other gently at the back of her neck, her fingers tickled by the knights' short hair as she felt strong arms loop around her in turn, harsh breathing in her ear that became speech,

"You'd give this to me?"

"I'm not using it," she rubbed the other womans' back comfortingly, "I have no idea where you'd need to even start but gods damn it it's something. It'll take years but who cares as long as it's right in the end; if it's not Illustria we'll find somewhere else, I'll still be looking."

"I can't… there's nothing I have…"

"This isn't a trade you fool," Chandra half-snarled, forcing her lips close to the knights' ear, "bloody hells above and below don't tell me you've forgotten yesterday? When we were on our knees, Koth, Kaguya and I, against that armoured grim reaper you broke his scythe and saved us all, something the half-metal man said couldn't be done."

"I've no idea how though; I don't know if I could do it again."

"Stop talking yourself down of you'll get another slap, this time a flaming one," Chandra warned, glad to hear the other woman snicker a little rather than sob, "before that, when you were hurting…"

"I know; your, ah, partner - he was right."

"He's got a habit for it; that's why they gave him the fancy title and his office, and the reason he's infuriating to live with half the time."

"And the other half?"

"Oh, uh, he's, just annoying," Chandra managed off the cuff, suddenly pressing the knight in tighter so Elspeth wouldn't see her caught out by the question,

"I wonder but I wasn't talking about Jace; when one of us fell another stepped in"; *when did - oh* ; the firebrand recalled the speaker and shook her head at the memory; *life lessons from someone I've likely ten years on, the Eternities taught him well* ; "thank you Chandra Nalaar, for everything. I'll help heal Mirrodins' scars then go on to this, Illustria."

"Good, look back but don't live there, I learned that the hard way and don't worry about it Elspeth, uh, it begins with a T doesn't it?"

"Tirel," the knight introduced herself fully as she broke their embrace, smiling as she remembered one of the sayings from the home she had lost; *but one I could see reborn* ; "when hell comes knocking everyone on your side of the door is your friend - we said that a lot in training."

"I'll bet, you didn't get the skills that put Spikes on his knees without practise; oh for," a sudden realisation made the fire mage snort with laughter she only just managed to suppress; it wouldn't do to wake either of the life mages sleeping outside, "I've no idea if Naruto planned this but if he did he's got a twisted sense of humour. Last time I went to sleep next to a white mage they coaxed me through my nightmares, my turn to repay the favour." Elspeth thought about this before laughing herself,

"So it would seem"; *another white mage?* ; a sudden revelation seized her, "You slept with Gideon Jura?" Chandra's mirth was strangled by a horrified hiccup,

"No! Well, yes but nothing happened," she defended against the sun mages' knowing smirk, "we slept, that was all and both with one eye open. I was protecting his virtue from an amorous vampress; it's a long and horrible story."

"I'm sure he was grateful"; *goodbye pride, probably forever if Jace finds out - mind you he had Liliana so he's not got a leg to stand on* ; "and I am too, thank you." Chandra shook her head,

"I wouldn't be here without several people picking me up and brushing me down or shaking me by the scruff of the neck when I needed it, just promise you'll do the same if anyone else needs a shoulder or a boot in the arse. Anyway keep that denouement, I'm sure my pet bookworm can rattle off another copy when he's skiving off work - do you feel all right?"

"Much better," the new leather in her hand was as much a comfort as the pyromasters' words, "let's go back; hopefully Vraska's not succumbed to the cold yet." Chandra kindled her braids into flame anew,

"She's tougher than she looks, hard as that might be to believe; come on, follow me."

Minutes later Elspeth inhaled as a blanket flopped over her, pressing backwards into the warm body that draped an arm over her side as she clasped the book close, a possible guide towards brighter days.

That night, surrounded by two strangers and with the monster kept at bay, Elspeth Tirel slept deeply.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 - Cards and Hearts.

The morning dawned clear and reasonably cold, Jace was up earlier than he'd have liked to be as the bench was sleeping on was less comfortable than he was used to. Trying to remember exactly what had happened and where everyone was to avoid walking in on anyone the mind-mage came to his feet and stepped over the man he'd spent a fair amount of time conversing with the previous night. Patting the parchment now folded in his pocket the Ravnican was hopeful Vensers' expertise would help him to sort out some kinks he'd been working on in his limited free time, hopefully finishing a project that could become more important than he'd first realised if things panned out correctly. Entering the main landing Jace notice nothing amiss and ticked off a mental list before snorting; *seven humans, two moonfolk, one elf, one Vulshok, one merfolk and one gorgon in a house - sounds like the start of a good joke* . The idea put him in fair humour as he set off downstairs, starting to clear the worst of the detritus away before realising he wasn't on his own,

"Oh, sorry Koth, hope I didn't wake you."

"Hah, I've slept in working forges before now," the Vulshok emerging from the stairs below assured him, flexing his arms, "not a bad pit, bit softer than I'm used to. So," their gazes met and Jace found his own question reflected back at him, "what in the name of all five of Mirrodins' suns do we do now?"

It was a question repeated, albeit with varied reflections and incanting the names of various gods, especially from Kiora who was determined not to let her guardian write any rules down out of fear of copying them out herself later. In the end it was summed up most succinctly by Vraska, the gorgon speaking with her usual sense after digesting all that had been said,

"We have, between us, a broad desire to help Naruto in his goal," there was a collective nodding of heads as she went on, "however we all, or mostly, have other issues going on at the moment and likely will for some time. Homes to rebuild, Guild and tribal business and such-like," again there was general agreement, "so we must resolve these issues as well as try to study how best to even begin creating a functioning world, especially as Naruto himself has no idea."

"Useless so-and-so," Kiora muttered, Venser hiding a snicker behind a sneeze before waving Vraska politely on,

"So that must be our first aim," the gorgon concluded, able to move around after a peaceful night albeit with a limp, "We must have at least an understanding of how this all works; I know a little from the Swarm but any further information will be gratefully received, especially as Chandra and I know from experience no two of his planes are alike."

"Couldn't make it easy for us could he?" Liliana chipped in, remembering the crude map of the planes above the bed she'd slept in the previous night, "So we resolve our other matters and what, meet back at this place? Do you have a time or date planned?"

"We'll have to have a pre-arranged time, we've no method for contacting each other across the planes"; *for now* ; Jace explained in, feeling the plans in his pocket, "so, when would be best? I'm virtually always here save for catastrophe, hence why this works as a meeting place."

Time passed as exact dates were haggled over but by the end of the morning a broad consensus had been struck, some four months being enough to either right or get a much firmer handle on any ongoing businesses. With this agreed the thirteen began to break apart, the largest group being made of five that were set to depart to Mirrodin, Jace reminded of one last thing before they set off,

"And if you're wondering why the Eternities seem less fraught recently, thank Naruto," he told the collected 'walkers, Chandra nodding as she remembered they'd omitted that revelation from the previous night; *something else we owe him for, though we've at least got a way to repay him now* ; "since his merging with it the whole thing is calming down, making it easier to travel."

"Similar to Zendikar," Nissa answered, inclining her stave in thanks to the planesmaker, "he has done much, and will likely do much more for all of us."

"We can hope; I certainly would not want him as an enemy," Kaguya admitted, bidding Kiora a last farewell as she prepared to join Venser and the others, "though I am glad he considers us more than mere tools as others might in his situation."

"Got that right," Chandra admitted, raising a hand in farewell as the five gathered outside then closing her eyes as their connections to the aether triggered and they were gone, 'walking away towards their distant plane, "damn, forgot to ask them to annotate my map."

"A minute too late, always the way," Garruk counselled in his soft tone, his axe newly-honed as he too prepared to go, "I may see you on the hunt small-claw, I track game on the violent plane for now."

"It's not as violent as it used to be thank the go-uh, the Eldrazi," Kiora told the bigger man, fingering the charm at her neck and thinking how to thank the hunter for it, "bye Garruk, we'll see you there with any luck." The hunter raised his axe in salute, the rest waving as he too was gone before the mergirl felt a hand on her shoulder,

"We'll not leave yet, we need to pick up a few essentials and we can do that here far more easily than we can elsewhere. My thanks for your time Jace," the mind-mage inclined his head, missing the glance the hieromancer flashed towards his housemate and her shallow nod, "stay close to me on the streets - if I lose you I might never find you again." Kiora laughed,

"You're not that lucky, anyway we can't go yet - be a minute," she darted back into the townhouse, skipping past Chandra as the firebrand watched her go amused. All was still for a while before she returned the way she'd come, Gideon's eye on her the whole way,

"Dare I ask?"

"Just said goodbye to Vraska," the gorgon was at her ease in the lounge, her leg still tender but healing well, "and Nissa too - we might see her as well while we're tracking down my school."

"It's another friendly face to look out for," he agreed, taking her hand and giving a last farewell before shepherding the mergirl onto the streets of the metropolis, Kiora waving until he dragged her around the front gate and heard for several seconds after that,

"He's doomed," Jace turned at the announcement, Chandra with her arms folded as she followed their course, "I'm still not sure what to make of all this but if Naruto did bring those two together I can't believe he's got truly evil intent, or if he does it's aimed at Gideon Jura which makes it okay in my book."

"That's cruel," the Ravnican denounced her despite his smile, "but he is doomed, especially when she starts noticing the opposite gender; that'll be worth a denouement on its own."

"Got that right; still," the red mage led the way inside, "eight down, three to go; let's see how old hop-along's bearing up."

Actually there were only two to go, Liliana having slipped out when no-one was looking for reasons only she knew but Jace was grateful for - at least she hadn't left with any great fanfare or upsetting the Church-goers of Ravnica. He would have been perfectly happy for Vraska to stay another night to ensure her leg was well but the gorgon waved both his and Chandras' concerns off, pointing out that the Swarm had conditions more conducive to her swift healing,

"And I don't travel alone," Nissa, within earshot, nodded, stowing her weapon in a manner than didn't show its blade as that would have attracted the arrestors, "I know several ways to the Swarm from here, there is little risk even in the day."

"If you get any issues scream and we'll come running," Chandra said semi-seriously, embracing the gorgon with her eyes closed, proof against the sinuous lengths brushing over her face as Nissa laughed,

"If you hear screams they won't be ours," the elf assured her, patting her stave, "I'll see her safely back to the, ah, Gol-gari." Jace bowed in the manner of the Zendikarian elves, or as close to it as he could manage, to signify his thanks,

"It will likely be different to what you are used to lady Revane."

"It likely will but this is not Zendikar," the elf reminded him, offering her hand, "here I consider us equal, and I will when I'm back there as well. The Joraga requires its shaman to lean the ways of the others, the supposed lessers - I believe they'll want to learn this lesson as much as I did, and they'll have no Vraska to save them from their folly." Jace took her slim hand in his own, shaking gently and smiling as she stiffened at the contact, not used to greeting in such a manner,

"I'm sure you'll be more than enough." Slightly buoyed by his reassurance she echoed his smile, similarly saying her farewell to Chandra before helping Vraska beyond the threshold of the main door, the gorgon still limping slightly but otherwise able to move relatively freely,

"Remember you're welcome any time," the firebrand called after her friend, staying on the doorstep until the duo were out of eyeshot as Gideon and Kiora had been, the sudden absence hurting more than she'd expected. *Vraska I've known a while and I'm her teacher in a way but the rest* ; she could remember them all far more clearly than she could most others; *ah well, next time I'll know what to do if I*

need to fix a face in my memory, drag it into a war with me. She stayed where she was a moment, feeling the cool breeze in her hair as the sun began to truly sink, Vraska delaying her departure until a time where it would be more difficult for most on the street to recognise her and Nissa as inhuman - she was always thinking cautiously like that. A sudden gust of wind made her shiver, snapping from her reverie and stepping inside, seeing her housemate as she closed the door and recognising what was on his mind easily,

"Washing."

"Laundry."

Though they'd had many offers of help for clearing up Jace hadn't taken any of them up for the same reason he had few of his staff into work when he was on Ravnica and not snowed under with Guild business; because he enjoyed it. In a world, or multitude of worlds, where he was constantly besieged by other minds, queries, concerns and the odd life-threatening situation the sheer mundanity of household chores was a cherished tether to a reality he often felt only tenuous connections to. He was also used to living alone and therefore fairly competent at most of them, though he had to admit the extra pair of hands did help, especially when those hands made sure the water for the washing up never went cold. After pegging out the last load of laundry, the sheets Vraska had slept on being the hardest to wash due to the mud-plaster the gorgon had applied starting to shed overnight, it was truly evening and he shut the back door with a small bang, leaning against it for a second before straightening and looking around the kitchen. All was as it should be and in the right place save the dishcloth, something that made him bite back a snigger before it was flicked at his head,

"Don't laugh," Chandra demanded, wiping her hands before throwing it onto the side, a speck of disorder amongst the cleanliness they'd restored from the wreckage of the thirteen-being crush the previous night, "not unless you want me to dry that linen out quick style."

"You'll be sleeping without if you do, we've nothing clean for the beds until that lot comes in. Still, that's all the beds made and towels changed, the bathroom cleaned though Kiora helped with that before she left, bless her and Gideon for likely teaching her how. On your side?" The red mage swept an arm around the kitchen,

"See for yourself; washing and drying done and the cellar and larder picked clean. Both'll take some restocking but if you want to sweep the cellar out you're on your own."

"Too many spiders?"

"Too much mushroom wine, can't stand the smell never mind the taste," she complained before stretching, "still, I reckon we're done."

"Good, I'm going to treat myself to a well-deserved collapse - you're welcome to join me."

"Best idea I've heard all day."

His favourite chair was like an old friend and Jace savoured sinking into its embrace, letting out a groan suffused with all the stress, worry and concern he'd had over the past day or so. *And it wasn't as bad as it could have been* ; as his legs splayed out in front of him he glanced over to see the firebrand mimicking him in her seat; *actually* ;

"Hey Chandra," he waited until she glanced over before carrying on, remembering what she'd told him privately during their cleaning spree, "I'm impressed how you handled last night."

"What, thought I couldn't be sensible?" She scoffed light-heartedly, hoping to disguise a little worm of pride, "You wouldn't be the first."

"I'm serious; I don't know what Elspeth told you but I saw terrible things, Mirrodin wasn't even the worst," he admitted, the knights' memories making him shiver even now, "it was a big thing stepping in like that, especially with Illustria; I know it was dear to your heart."

"She needed it a lot more than I did and if it works good for everyone; she gets a home back, Naruto gets a plane full of life and we, all of us, can get an idea just what we're supposed to do with this whole thing. Bloody hell Jace," it had been coming, the housework had only staved off the inevitable and lessened its impact marginally, "I said it before and I'll say it again what the hell?!"

"I know, in fact no I don't, that's the worst thing," the mind-mage chuckled, surprising even himself with his reaction to everything, "yesterday we knew about the planesmaker, fine; I can accept there's something in the Multiverse bigger than me, accepted it the day I saw Nicol Bolas face to face. What I'm finding a bit tougher to digest is that not only did he do his best to help us, as he saw it, he hatched a scheme that caught not one or two but *thirteen* of us and none of us had any idea what was going on. We were actually on Ilyonde, the aspect was made on that sea-cliff and we didn't see it, I didn't see it at all. Then worst of all, when he explains what's going on his friendly Eldrazi, no sorry, his bijuu tells us he's being torn apart because he's got limits we never even thought about, and to top it all off he asks us, who he could destroy without really thinking about it, for help - but for my dignity I'd scream!"

"I can cover my ears," Chandra offered with a smile before the expression fell and became pensive, "you know the thing that gets me the most about all of this; how much did he actually plan?"

"How do you mean?"

"This, all this, all of us," the firebrand went on, "if he saw the future or futures as he claimed how much did he sculpt it? Am I sat here in this chair because he willed it, because he set a course for me to walk and I'm following without realising it? Are we just pieces to him, like those pawns?"

She gestured to the small table between them, a chess set and a deck of battered cards atop it; the firebrand had accepted Jaces' offer to learn how to play and eventually gotten a hang of the rules, though she still had cause to be grateful for the learning-stick he'd

made for her; she could never quite remember how the knight moved. In return he was now a sharp at several tavern games with both cards and dice, though her special set of knucklebones had come as a nasty surprise when he tried to disguise the numbers with illusion magic and they'd screamed bloody murder at him. She was so lost in the memory she almost didn't hear his reply,

"I don't think so Chandra; not for any logical reason but because I just can't see it," the mind-mage admitted, shaking his head, "I've met schemers, hell I've been a schemer and Naruto - no, the picture just won't form. And anyway," a sudden thought occurred to him, one he instinctively knew was just the start of a thread, "assume the worst, that he preordained everything we've done so far. What's to stop you getting off that chair and leaving, forgetting everything he told you and going to, I don't know, learn how to channel black mana?" Chandra regarded him amazed before understanding dawned slightly,

"Nothing, but," she paused but eventually met his eyes, "I don't want to." Something hot rose in mind-mages' throat; he had to swallow before he could speak again,

"Exactly, that's the way I feel as well and I'm almost certain the way Naruto is; he's not dangling us like puppets though gods know he could. I think Venser said it best, if wanted to manipulate us we'd never have seen him, he could have stayed hidden forever but his conscience wouldn't let him; I don't think he can be dishonest, especially not to people he thought he'd hurt."

"Just as well; could you imagine someone like him being callous? Because I think he does care," Chandra was oddly touched by the realisation as Jace looked on intrigued, "if he saw what might happen to us through the Eternities but thought he couldn't warn us directly because we'd laugh or curse him at least he did something. It's like if you saw a stranger walking in front of a Rakdos procession, you'd pull them out the way wouldn't you?"

"Especially if Exava was leading it," Jace shuddered before grafting flesh to the bones of her deductions, "but I think there's more to it that just that; he had an overall plan, not just a one-off pull to safety. What he did was; I'm trying to think of a way to put this; he," a sudden memory of an elven girl saying goodbye flashed up in his mind and he seized on it, another finger-length along the thread, "it's like if we were selecting Guilds to petition for."

"Guilds?"

"Just hear me out; imagine you've never been to Ravnica before and you have to decide which of the ten Guilds to go into, you have no idea about any of them," Jace elaborated, seeing more and more as he pictured the scene, "a schemer like Tezzeret, or even me, would be right onto you, cajoling, bullying or blackmailing you into the guild he wanted you in; no ifs, no buts that's where you're going. Naruto didn't do that; he's there for just long enough to put a word in your ear - I think that Guild would be best for you - and that's it, you don't see him again. You're free to ignore his advice and carry on as you would have but, since you know no better, why not have a look at them first - that stranger could be right."

"And apart from you and me no-one knew who he was, which was the whole idea! That's why he had the different authors; he saw us all under different guises! That sneaky, conniving," the firebrand thumped the armrest of her sea, both aggravated and impressed despite herself as she extrapolated Jaces' reasoning, "it was a two-trick shuffle with only him in on it!"

"A two-what?"

"Remind me to take you to a proper tavern sometime, not those fancy places you drag me to."

"I don't recall you protesting being dragged," he replied archly, recalling the few times they'd dined out in Ravnica to celebrate a new plane being found, though he had to adopt a disguise to avoid

potential spies tailing him and making trouble for them both. She snorted, wafting a hand idly,

"I'm not turning down a free meal, and the company's nice; a two-trick shuffle's the oldest con in the Multiverse, everywhere does it. Someone pulls you to a gaming table where someone else has just finished and you start a new game with the tavern deck; what's really happened is that the person who just left is in on the con. He's stacked the deck and left it for his friend and your coin-purse is going to get a lot lighter; Naruto did the same."

"How? No, don't answer that," Jace knew almost as soon as he asked the question, "he said it himself; he followed us in the Eternities and outside them, learned what we were like and who we were from afar. That was how he, ah, stacked the deck?" Chandra had already picked up the cards from the table, shuffling them as only one who'd lived most of her life on the road could,

"Hearts and Knives, one hand; I'll do what Naruto did."

She quickly rippled through the deck, the mind-mage watching as she shifted a selection of cards onto the top before dealing them each a hand of five; *hmm, the First Heart but plenty of blocking cards to shelter it* ;

"So," he looked up from his cards to see Chandra glancing to the table between them, "your move." Sizing her up Jace laid his first card, Chandra mimicking him and within a few moments the hand was over, the mind-mage slightly edging it as the First Heart remained unpierced,

"I think I see," Jace told her as she scooped up the revealed cards, "you knew how I'd play and judged what to do from there. Naruto did the same for all of us."

"Yes and here's the clever bit"; *really clever - he put a hell of a lot of effort into this. It wasn't just a passing fancy or a prank* ; "one more hand." Ten more cards were dealt, Jace this time coming off much

the worse until his opponent played her second-to-last card and he realised,

"You reversed our cards; I've got the hand you were playing last game." Chandra grinned, flicking her last card around to show the First Heart,

"And you didn't play it as well because it's not suited for your game; I know you too well, you try to shield your hearts rather than go for your enemies. That's why there were the different authors Jace; Exava, the knight, Jhon'ee - he stacked the deck differently for each of us."

"Because what worked for one wouldn't - of course!" The cards were scattered as Jace clapped a hand to his forehead, remembering some of the stories that had been told last night and his phenomenal mind ran along the thread, "Look at Gideon and Kiora, the drifting net; all Naruto-as-Jhon'ee had to do was introduce them. They could have got off that boat, said goodbye and never seen each other again but Gideon wouldn't do that; I don't know him as well as you but I don't think he'd abandon a lone child, least of all one throwing herself head-first into danger. But that wouldn't have worked with Liliana for instance; as Timothy he took a chunk from her pride but made sure she and Garruk met without bloodshed. Even… damn it," the mind-mage smacked his arm-rest but even as he did he was laughing, looking from the seat to the firemage who sat enthralled as he made connections and drew lines most wouldn't see, "Naruto didn't put you where you are now Chandra, I did!"

"You? How?"

"Before all this, before you came to me with news of a plane with nothing on it how many other places did you go to first?"

"Not too many," Chandra shrugged, "I was never keen on libraries and, well, no criminal record here…"

"That they can prove"; *couldn't resist it could you?* ; ever since she'd admitted where her gauntlet and armour came from Jace had been threatening to rat her out to the Guild responsible for their creation, a threat they both knew he'd never follow through. Meeting his interruption with a scowl until he nodded in apology, the red mage carried on,

."..and you were likely the best chance I knew of finding a lead. But he showed himself to us both and told us everything because of what we'd done with the Eldrazi right?" She ventured, not entirely sure where he was going with this but emboldened by Jaces' nodding,

"And after that, when he brought us back and after all the traps he left; by the way Venser was a big fan of that mirror, heard him chuckling about it earlier. It turned his hair green and Tamiyos' jet black, she was going to kill him for pouring ink in it again before I told her. But anyway we got through the traps, sat down and then what?"

"We," it seemed so long ago it took a few seconds for her to remember, "we got, ah, sloshed, or you did and didn't I say something about stars? Then," Jace couldn't hold his smile as he saw understanding illuminate her face like sunlight, "the tavern, you put me up for the night!"

"I couldn't throw you out half-cut," Jace carried on for her, explaining his thought process and how it had led them here, "partly because of what we'd been through and partly out of fear of what you might do; no offence but at the time I thought you were a time-bomb sober; so you got the guest room. The day after I thought you were gone until I heard you in the library, which you started clearing because you hate feeling beholden to anyone, then I came up with the offer because, well, I wanted to know about the planesmaker but didn't want to leave Ravnica - everything else fell out of that! Son of a rot-crotched thrull he didn't make us do anything, we all did what came naturally; he shuffled the deck and stacked our first hands, everything that happened afterwards was up to us! When's a choice not a choice - when something seems so right and so obvious you just don't think

about doing it." Chandra was left astonished before something else flashed up in her mind,

"And that damned denouement of his was in on it; I'm going to skin that fox next chance I get! Think about it either Naruto or Kurama, or both, knew us well enough to set a challenge I'd pass but you wouldn't," Jace grimaced, not liking the reminder but nodding at the sense her words made, "it can't have been coincidence Naruto appeared so soon after the fox gave us a bit of insight into his life and his burdens. It must have been a weight off his mind to tell someone something of the truth, but he could only tell us because the others had no idea he existed; even if they found one of his planes they'd have no idea where it came from. Even when he reappeared," she blushed despite her grin, "mentioning romance and the two of us; he cued you up to kiss me but you actually did it, you even admitted you wanted to." Jace also pinkened, not able to face the woman for a moment before moving on,

"Yes, well, I did," the pyromaster felt a trickle of heat in her veins at the admission, though Jace carried on before she could ponder it, "and when he was gone you played a joke on me to get even, all those different things happened and we ended up - well I was broken, or felt like it at least. All from that first nudge, and we'd never have even known but for his conscience forcing him to come clean - aargh, the next time I get hold of that little orange bastard I'll do something he'll regret, and stop laughing!" Chandra tried, she really did but even so it was a while before she could glance at him,

"That was a pathetic scream."

"I wasn't trying," Jace told her sniffily before sighing, "but he found us all and did the same thing; learned about us, introduced us in some cases but he didn't make us do anything; we weren't forced, we weren't even guided and you know the worst thing?" The firebrand shook her head, "It's still our choice now; you or I could throw our cards in, back away from the table and stop playing but I don't want to. We've been given an opportunity to do something beyond what

we dreamed possible and, regardless that he stacked one or two cards it's our decks that'll make it happen, and not just ours."

"The others," in the excitement the pyromaster had almost forgotten the other players the planesmaker had shuffled with, "gods I can barely believe that, we met eleven other planeswalkers, we were all under the same roof and nothing kicked off, that's got to be some kind of record."

"Probably is, though I never knew how big the Infinite Consortium really was," Jace mused before snickering, "and it didn't even matter that Liliana caught onto his scheme first - if you'd spotted a copy of his novels on the shelves during your travels what would you have done?"

"What, his Hero-novels?" Chandra seemed stumped before mulling the problem over, "Uh, well if it was our one I'd have been worried, especially if I saw it somewhere other than Ravnica, or if it had shown Vras or Gideon and I recognised them," her eyes widened, "I'd have tried to find them, warn them. I'd have done exactly what Liliana did, or almost - they had to know there was something after them, or if they were responsible they'd need dealing with!"

"So would I," Jace shook his head; *if all the shinobi of his plane are like him that's one place to never set foot - I'd be swindled blind before I got past hello* ; "any one of us could have found the books he wrote and we'd have all, or mostly, been intrigued and-stroke-or insulted into finding out what the writer knew. Liliana arranged the council because she thought one of us must have been the culprit, I'd have wanted to know to avoid potential bribery but the end result would likely have been that conclave, it just made sense for everyone affected to be in the same room! After we came together he answered the call as his authors, people we each knew and mostly hated, we had a fight and when it was over he explained it. We could have run, not helped each other but we didn't; we helped strangers just as he tried to because hell, it was the right thing to do."

"When's a choice not a choice," Chandra echoed his earlier words, head in her hands before they smoothed down her hair, "and now we've got another one as a group. Do we help him - not really a choice either is it? He even said he's not expecting us to drop what we're doing so it's not like he's shackling us to a chain-gang. We can do it, we'll have to do it slowly and we'll start on Illustria; remind me of that in four months or so."

"Why?"

"Because it's Elspeths' - we're going to make that world as a surprise for her, it'll help everything she's been through," the firebrand declared, Jace nodding in agreement as he realised how much of a tonic that could be for the suffering woman, "hey, I'm beginning to get a handle on this helping strangers thing."

"Somehow I doubt you're the only one," Jace snickered before sobering, reaching a hand across to the other planeswalker, "and honestly, regardless of how he stacked our first cards I think we played the hands thereafter pretty well; I know I did."

Chandra stilled, regarding his outstretched hand for just long enough for Jace to feel nervous before to his relief she took it in her own. Bereft of the glove it was usually encased in the fire mages' skin was surprisingly soft, though the feel of her fingertips made Jace smirk a little,

"Dishpan hands?"

"They were your dishes," she muttered caustically, though she didn't pull away as she returned the cards to the table. A companionable silence fell, the two mulling everything over in their minds and happy in each others' company before the red mage glanced over as the fingers under her own trembled,

"What's so funny?"

"Just thinking," Jace managed, stilling his mirth, "I wonder how much we didn't hear yesterday. Naruto knows all of us; he knows what would make us think something was a good idea, I wonder how he found out - hopefully not with a telescope." The pyromancer shuddered,

"He'll be cooked to the bone if he even thinks about it," she said seriously before her face morphed into an expression of impish mischief. Biting her lips she shot him a wink, stood up and quickly departed, Jace wondering what she was up to before the thunder of her going up the stairs made him leap to a guess; *she couldn't, they'll kill us if they find out! I'd better stop her for both our sakes, or should I* ; a glimpse of the battered deck on the table made him think again; *will it do any harm really? Nah, a stacked deck is one thing but an ace up the sleeve need never be known about!*

With a canny bit of balancing she managed all six in one trip, glancing over at the mind-mage as he watched her arrive, his shaking head undone by the grin creasing his lips,

"You're really losing your ability to look innocent."

"I don't have the best influences, either here or in the Guildmeet," he riposted, Chandra sticking her tongue out before carefully depositing the stack of books on the table between their chairs and then, as he'd half-expected, standing directly in front of him. There was a stare-down for a few second before he budged over with a theatrical sigh, letting the pyromaster take a seat half-beside him, half on his lap, her legs thrown over his own. It had started as a way of annoying him, Chandra making a terrible nuisance of herself when he took work home, but had evolved into something else, a melding of togetherness and irritation they both equally suffered from and enjoyed. Blowing out a breath Jace relaxed into her, the coolness of her metal armour a stark contrast with the warmth of the arm around his shoulders as his own snaked around her back, cushioning her from the arm of his seat and starting to gradually fall asleep,

"You need a bigger chair."

"You always say that," he remarked, looking up at her; missing her normal goggles, gauntlet and armour Chandra looked as much a different person as he did out of his Guildpact robes, "if eleven guests are becoming the norm I need a bigger house." It was her turn to smile, her closest hand ruffling his already spiked hair,

"We managed didn't we? Bit of a squeeze but no-one died."

"Only because we had two living out and one in the bath, though having said that Garruk and Nissa both have my respect for surviving out there," the mind-mage put in, resting against her ribcage content, "and Koth could have been more comfortable, the cellar's a bit soft for his liking."

"Yeah Elspeth mentioned; suppose it comes from growing up on a world of metal. What a horrible thought - how hard it must be to burn things on Mirrodin?"

"I'm sure you'd find a way," Jace assured her, feeling her answering chuckle before lifting his head away as she moved, not wanting to risk getting his hair trapped in the steel links, "so, which one first; I can hold it but you'll have to turn the pages."

"I can live with that; picking blind," her long hair brushed his cheek as she looked away from the table; he heard a heavy thump and resigned himself to hunting down rogue chess pieces later before the spine of a tome landed in his outstretched palm. Glancing at the title and illustration he snorted, rolling his eye towards his co-reader,

"Sure this was blind?"

"Jace, you doubt me," she looked away as though hiding tears, "I'm wounded."

"And you say I can't look innocent; ah no fair, no free hands," he complained, the fingers now gripping his ear like a pair of tongs

slackening slightly, "I'm sorry and you'll pay for that later."

"Scary," Chandra said dryly, releasing her prisoner before gently opening the front page, "so *Beast and Beauty* ; let's see what Naruto made of the Wildspeaker and your old, in all senses of the word, squeeze."

What the planesmaker had made was a tale very different to theirs, though still with a definite tang of sauce running through it. It was also far from the traditional story of the princess-damsel in distress as well, something Chandra picked up on as she leant forwards and relieved Jace of his burden, letting the mind-mage flex his numbed arms,

"I can see why Viviana's popular, she's true to life," the fire mage commented, taking in the ink-bound semi-heroine, "dangerous but, playful, if that's the word?"

"Something like it, though I imagine her kidnappers didn't feel the same; 'you keep a dagger in your garter?"Yes', thunk, 'one in my muffler as well'. Funny but damned effective, and as you said true to life."

"You'd be the expert on what's in her garter"; *I walked into that one* ; he was left to cringe, revenge limited to a slight poke in the small of the back as she retook her place, "though Gar-uh, Tarrut's a great foil. That he just wants to hunt on the kings' land as a reward is great and you can see it grating on Viviana the whole time; why doesn't he bow and worship me like everyone else?"

"Naruto got her right; she never minded hate or anger, it was apathy she couldn't stand," Jace chipped in, seeing the echo of the woman he had once lusted after in the drawn girl, "best way of getting her attention was to ignore her, which might put Garruk at risk when I think about it - I doubt he's hunted prey as dangerous as she can be."

"He's too smart to go looking for that kind of trouble, unlike others I could name," Jace was left wincing again as the pyromaster reclined onto his arm and put the book back down on his open palm, "so, they've just escaped the kidnappers' cerberi by diving-stroke-being pushed into a river, I pity the man who'd try that in real life. So, moving on - oh," Jace had to look away at the full-page spread, the two main characters emerging dripping from the water and the clinging properties of Viviana's courtly dress, already ripped from harsh travel, graphically revealed, "and I pity the man who saw that in real life as well, I'm pretty sure Liliana would make it the last thing he ever saw!"

Time snailed and soared past, the two ignoring its passage as they made their way slowly through the novel, breaking for refreshments and relief from cramp as required; by the time they closed the final page and started scanning the back of the book it was late, though how late neither knew as they began dissecting the planesmakers' work,

"You can tell it's his first," Jace began, skilfully turning the book over in his single free hand to see the front cover again, "he hasn't quite got the drawing style down, it was a little cleaner in *Ice and Fire* . Still that's a niggle; it was fun and he got the characters absolutely nailed."

"Too right, especially Garruk I thought - some of those lines," Chandra snorted, letting Jace pull his arm free again, "'You think with your loins', 'and I'm still smarter than you'; I could just see him saying that to someone like her."

"And she'd react just like Vivi did; trust me I know," the fire mage stifled laughter at his long-suffering sigh before he went on, "the ending was good as well; he helps her back to her castle and she has him thrown in the dungeon, then lets him escape with a night to get his hunt done. That really sums Liliana up; doing her a favour's as risky as kissing a viper, even more so if she repays it."

"Though he got her back as well; I'd love to see how she covered up the love-bite and you could tell she was expecting more," Chandra pointed out, flicking to the back of the book and pointing out a few of the last illustrations, "even without the thought-bubble he drew it well, and her face when he drops her to run out the escape tunnel." Jace nodded,

"Lucky for Tarrut she's not a gorgon; lucky for her as well or she'd have topped herself at the end," he sniggered, flicking towards the end pages and drinking in the sight of the raven-haired princess seeing the huge discolouration on the side of her neck in her vanity mirror, "I'm surprised the glass didn't crack. Tarrut better be out of her kingdom before sun-up or he'll be back in the dungeon for a lot longer."

"If he's lucky," Chandra put in saucily, "bad huntsman, send him to my room; fate worse than death. So, was it better than ours?" It took Jace a few seconds to regather himself but eventually managed, considering the question seriously,

"It's not quite as well drawn though some of the forests are gorgeous and I think the story's a little more basic; the reveal in *Ice and Fire* is brilliant. He builds it up, this huge treasure Sandra's after he's going to show her then he pulls the curtain down on that portrait and you can see she's pregnant; there were tears in my eyes never mind hers, especially when Neberel says she can never take Natiha from him."

"And when Kaput explains he meant his tower to be their home," the fire mage swallowed thickly, "when she passed he couldn't bring himself to leave. I can put myself in Sandra's shoes; I couldn't stay but at the same time it'd be awful watching someone lock themself away like that."

"I could understand why though," Jace said solemnly, "not just for the memories; and just for the record I have no idea of anyone named Natiha, I'm pretty sure he made that one up. Neberel's a powerful mage, he wants to be left alone because he's afraid people will just

want his powers - been there and done that, several times. That's why I liked the ending though - you can't hide in a hole all your life however tempting it might seem."

"Least of all when the best thief in the world is on the case," Chandra grinned, the mind-mage trying valiantly to resist the infectious humour but failing, "sorry Be-Neberel but you had no hope against the Scarlet Sash, the Painted Rose, the…"

"Twisted ankle?" She scowled, remembering how her novel counterpart had been captured in her infiltration of the mages' sanctum, a simple raised stone catching her just as she was almost away, "though I'm glad you reminded me; is the Painted Rose real? I know you said not but it would suit you too well; the curiosity's killing me." She sized him up for a long couple of seconds and he worried he might have been too bold before he felt her shift as much as she could next to him,

"Points for subtlety; too low and you'll not get your fingers back," she muttered grudgingly, trying not to fidget as she felt the hem of her leggings rolled down and butterflies kipped up in her stomach,

"No rose then," Jace's tone was flippant but laced with respect, the red mage having to hold in a gasp as a small icicle traced down her exposed hip, "but I remember you saying about that scar; dare I ask where it came from?" His voice was gentle as he re-covered the skin that, in print, was adorned with a rose-petal birthmark, hence one of Sandra Nailers' titles, giving Chandra time to answer; *though leaning forwards to hide her face with her hair - this is likely a story she doesn't want to tell* ;

"Goblin assassin," she mumbled, Jace only convinced she wasn't pulling a fast one when she looked away from him completely,

"Really?" Her mane of auburn bobbed and despite himself he shook with suppressed mirth, "This I've got to hear."

"It's embarrassing," she wheedled, "promise not to laugh?"

"I'll do my utmost"; *the best I'm going to get* ; she thought reluctantly, preparing to dredge up the unedifying memory,

"It, ah, actually it wasn't long after our first duel," she recalled with a laugh, Jace not gloating about his victory as she was now far more accomplished in battle magic than he was, "I got into a bit of trouble with some local ouphes, burnt down part of their forest and they put a contract out on me. Didn't realise it until I woke up one night to find a pair of goblins in my bedroom and one of them got lucky; a lucky hit! You're disgusting, and you promised," she declared, folding her arms and looking away disgruntled as Jace's giggles shook through them both, almost dislodging the Herotica book in his lap,

"Goblins in the bedchamber, I'm sure they were playing that as a farce not that long ago; oh come on, you couldn't expect me to keep a straight face and I know what you meant. Look on the bright side at least you've still got all your extremities - I sometimes wonder where my toe ended up." It was Chandra's turn to laugh,

"I dread to think."

"I do too," the mind-mage confessed, banishing the dark memories with a smile, "still, ready for another of the planesmakers' interpretations - I must admit I'm intrigued after *Beast and Beauty* ." Chandra scooped the novel out of his lap and he heard a thump as she deposited it with the others, though when she turned back to him her hands were empty,

"Maybe tomorrow, I'm sleepy," as though the words were a charm the mind-mage found himself having to stifle a yawn; *what time is it anyway, apart from late?* ; "bed time, this time without a rasping gorgon or snoring knight - seriously Elspeth was rattling the chess pieces, don't let her sleep on her back."

"I doubt that'll be a problem for me; if we're ever sleeping in the same room it'll mean either things have gotten truly desperate or I need a white mage to shield my innocence," Chandra scowled at his

teasing before stretching exaggeratedly, draping her closest arm around his neck doe-eyed,

"No," her lip quivered,

"You'd…"

"I would," Jace affirmed, giving her only the corner of his eye to prevent his threadbare resistance snapping, "the gods gave you legs."

"They gave you arms too," she shot back before sliding over his knees to stand, "forgot to give you a working heart though - ow!"

At her yelp Jace half-shot to his feet then fielded her falling form as she collapsed backwards, pain shooting up his tailbone as she fell ungainly onto his thighs and he fell back onto his chair,

"What happened?"

"I, I think I twisted my ankle."

"You wh… really, a line from a penny-dreadful?"

"It's not dreadful and it hurts," Chandra whined, rubbing her supposed injury with a pout, "I can't walk and you can't keep your face straight."

"You can and so can I," he regretted the boast as soon as he'd said it and the fire mage pounced,

"Five heartbeats says you can't," he nodded and got to about three before cracking, snorting helplessly as Chandra clenched her fist in triumph before belatedly remembering her pain, "you lose Nebby; carry me upstairs."

"Never call me Nebby again," Jace shuddered as her arm snaked around his neck a second time; *she wins this round, but only this round* ; everyone forgot that the lowest depths of a plane were found

under the sea, something the devious plan that infiltrated his brain proved. Luxuriating in her victory the pyromaster was caught completely unawares as after being lifted in his arms she was suddenly thrown upwards and back, so shocked she forgot to struggle; as she saw the back of his chair and felt pressure in the pit of her stomach all she could do was complain about the change in circumstance,

"Not quite what I had in mind," she stated irritably, blowing a lock of hair from her face,

"Ah but it's in the small things where the thief falls to the mage," he quoted sagely, Chandra having to fight hard not to snicker as he quoted their novel, "you said carry you, you never said how."

"Ha-ha very clever," she retorted caustically, watching the floor sway beneath her as he moved off, "so you decided Garruk-style?"

"I'll tell him that shall I - remember what happened to the last brat who crossed his path," Jace said warningly, gripping across the back of her knees with one arm to make sure she didn't fall and screwing up his courage; *either this works or I die medium rare - still, I've almost suffered worse ways to go* ; "his hands are as big as saucepans too."

"He wouldn't dare, and you'd defend me right Jace?"

"How exactly? His axe weighs more than I do; if I hit him he probably wouldn't notice."

"You're smart, I'm sure you'd think of something," she said encouragingly, counting off the stairs as they ascended, "and if he's eating you first he might choke to death before he got to me."

"I feel so appreciated."

"I'd mourn," Chandra told him, patting his back from her semi-horizontal position, "though you'd have to go to the Swarm after the

funeral, Vraska would see you got pride… uh Jace? *Jace!* "

Feather-edged lightning shot through her, only the tightening grip on her legs preventing her squirming off his shoulder as her entire body jack-knifed,

"Where are you going?" She already knew the answer and felt the internal butterflies take off again, "My room's over…"

"Small things Chandra," he declared gleefully, moving towards the opposite end of the hallway to the one she'd been expecting, "you said upstairs, not where upstairs."

"You know where I meant!" But that was likely a moot point unless she did something quickly; alive with nerves and excitement the firebrand snatched at the first glimpse of salvation. For a horrible second she thought she'd missed but then there was something hard under her fingers and she clung on tight, the corner of the stairwell stalling their progress. The word 'stalemate' flashed across her mind before she found herself racked as he tried to press on regardless,

"Let go," she tried to kick and writhe free, jangling nerves adding a semi-hysterical note to her voice though she wasn't scared, not really, "you're stretching me!"

"You let go, you're stretching yourself."

"No!" She hung on tighter, overriding the faint whisper in her mind that listening to him might not be such a terrible thing, "I'll catch fire!"

"Call!"

"What?" The answer was so unexpected her grip almost slipped, Chandra trying to look over her shoulder at the man carrying her to… she daren't think about it,

"I'm calling you," she could all but taste his smugness, "that's what you do when you think someone's' bluffing isn't it? Your move oh Scarlet Sash."

He was mocking her, it would take an instant to embrace the flame and get out of this mess so why was she still holding on with aching fingers? He'd dared her, she never backed down from a challenge and there had been a time when he'd have been a torch as soon as she'd set eyes on him; why was nothing burning yet? For the first time in her life Chandra Nalaar was invited to use the intoxicating strength that had consumed her since birth and wasn't even smouldering; however much he deserved it she just couldn't bring herself to turn Jace Beleren to ash, not any more. The realisation only made the struggle to hold on harder - the butterflies in her stomach weren't shy of catching alight; *traitors. Stop pulling you sod - I'll have eight-foot arms by the end of this - wait* ; her thrashing was reflexive, legs flailing from the knees down but doing little against his stronger grip until for an instant the bar just above her knees slackening, though it tightened again before she could capitalise; *he changed them over? Is he getting tired - good, keep kicking - I'll tire him out, get free then kick his arse!* ;

"Still feeling cool here," the end of her braids smoked involuntarily; bad enough he was safe from her flames, did he have to rub her nose in it? "I take it you check? Fine, I'll raise." *Oh no* ; dread flooded over her as she suddenly guessed why he'd changed arms; *the other one wouldn't reach* ;

"Don't you dare," she shrieked, fighting harder than ever, "you promised!"

"One only when we're duelling, two that's rich from the girl with the motto 'rules were made to be broken' and three," at the touch on her side the firebrand swore, bracing for the worst, "my nose, ear and forehead send their sympathies; the rest of me says revenge is sweet!"

Caught in a quandary Chandra could only endure, spitting curses and wriggling frantically to try and throw off the fingers drifting feather-light where her mail had ridden up. A small part of her mind accepted it was karmic retribution, the rest fought with everything it had to avoid both losing her hold and giving him the satisfaction of hearing her break,

"I'll tip over every shhehelf in your library," she threatened, squeezing her eyes shut and recounting every mantra from Keral Keep, every line of her denouements she could remember; anything to drown out this exasperating torture, "your lab's getting trahahahashed - stop it!"

"Hmmm, no," he eased up a little; *just enough to make the crushing masterstroke irresistible* ; "I remember asking a pyromancer to stop annoying me when I was helpless and, funny thing, she didn't - what comes around goes around as they say." It was pointless and likely to make a bad situation worse but it was all the vengeance she could muster; he had an unfortunate habit of misquoting old sayings and Chandra wasn't going to let a chance to trip him up slip,

"Wrong way around - ehehehehee-no!" The spidery strokes had suddenly danced towards her ribs, she'd instinctively hunched to defend one of her most vulnerable spots and the stalemate was broken. Her loosened grip was torn from its mooring; she was too far away to recover her hold, slightly too slow catch his retreating fingers and left fuming; *what do I do? I can't, well I could… no, there's got to be a way out of this!* The sides of the hallway were too far apart to give any traction, there couldn't be much time left; the butterflies were in full flight as she thumped the mind-mages' back,

"I'll get you for this Beleren!" She threatened, trying to drown her rising mirth, both from his underhanded attack and somewhere deeper, with wrath, "Put. Me. *Down!* "

"In a minute," his breezy voice assured her, the burning butterflies making her face ignite as she heard a handle turn, a door swish open, "watch your head." The words and the glimpse over her

shoulder was the end, her resistance dissolved by sudden memories as Jace bore her triumphantly into his room.

That was easier than I'd guessed ; he'd expected a hellish fight to drag her through the doorway; that she'd come quietly was worrying and exciting on a multitude of levels; *and I didn't get to hear her laugh again.* She had a nice laugh; one of the reasons he told anecdotes, even personally embarrassing ones, was to hear it when he had the chance; but that she was quiescent was so concerning he nearly forgot to take sensible precautions before releasing her legs; *cross them, remember what her feet are parallel with!* Luckily for his bloodline Chandra seemed not to notice her semi-freedom, in fact it wasn't until he spoke her name she reacted at all. Feeling her squirming backwards the Ravnican gently took hold of her hips, helping her slide to the ground as he caught a glimpse of her face,

"What is it?"

"Just thinking you're not the first man to carry me like that," she smiled wistfully, "I was a mare as a girl, never went to bed when I was told; mama was all for giving me the switch but pa never did. He'd chase me, catch and carry me there; I shared with my sisters and he'd tell stories to settle us; you reminded me of him when you said mind out."

Jace saw the pain these bittersweet recollections were causing; why once, just once couldn't things go well - even when joking he ended up hurting the important people in his life. Earlier joy withered by her candour he regarded the fire caster softly,

"I'm sor…" He was cut off gently, Chandras' fingers covering his lips,

"Don't be," her forgiveness only twisted the knife, leaving him bleeding inside as she went on, "I remember the kind man he was, I'll always remember him that way. Still," a playful edge honed her voice as she placed her hand back around his neck, Jace belatedly remembering he'd yet to move his own, "he carried me to my room

to settle me for the night - dare I ask why you carried me to yours? Mama was strict but sensible; she always told us be careful who sweeps you off your feet." Ironically the mind-mages' mind was blank, completely wiped clean as he was lost in the firebrands' face, her eyes, her teasing smile; it wasn't until he heard the fluting laugh he treasured the spell broke and he chuckled with her, chagrined,

"Honestly I didn't plan this far ahead; I half-expected to be charcoal by now." There was silence for an instant before she snorted, his arms sliding around her out of instinct as she tucked her chin against his shoulder, her crown chafing his stubbled cheek,

"Didn't think I was that scary," she mused, unable to see the expressions flashing over the Ravnicans' face, the certainly crystallising behind his eyes as he thought hard for a way to convey it, "I think, yeah it was Vraska I said this to first but it goes for you too Jace - don't change, you're priceless as you are."

The word was the missing link, forging his sudden influx of ideas into a workable whole; if he didn't owe the planesmaker before he did now. Relaxed against him and considering learning to purr as he caressed her back slowly Chandra almost didn't hear his answer until she tilted her head to listen,

"I'm not priceless, but if you were trying to find it in this house you're in the right place"; *huh?* ; she took half a step back intrigued as Jace echoed her and spread his arms, "welcome, as one Caje Neberel might say, to my inner sanctum. All else is just trinkets and toys, some more expensive than others but all replaceable compared to something in here - I do hope the thief in my lair won't try and steal it."

"I'm not a thief, anymore," she tacked the last word on under his quizzical disbelief before smirking; *fine, if you want to play that way I'll play* ; "still I assume it's well-hidden?"

"Forgive a little boasting but as a powerful mage I have many illusions and snares to protect what's dear to me. If anyone were to

take it they'd have to be a master criminal"; *and I would never stop hunting whoever did* .

"I see," without his gift of telepathy Chandra was unaware of his mental oath as she glanced around the small bedroom, unchanged from the last time she'd been in here; *not that long ago actually, it's not like he can ban me from knocking on him for something when I live down the hallway* ; "well it's been a while but I reckon I can unpick the master mages' defences."

"I wonder," Jace smirked before turning slightly more serious, "okay Chandra here's the deal. I'm not giving you any clues what you're looking for but it is in this room somewhere, and it's not under the carpet or in the ceiling or anywhere obscure like that. I'm not going to interfere," he sat cross-legged on the end of his bed, "I'll stay right here unless you want me to move. Look where you like, move anything you like as it doesn't tear the place apart; you can have, two minutes?"

"Five."

"Three"; Chandra was longing to wipe that smirk off his face but wary - he always had some kind of trick and she'd take every advantage she could get to ferret it out,

"Three and a half," she pushed, unable to disguise a slight relieved breath as he nodded after mulling it over,

"Fair enough; you trust me to keep time?"

"Unless you can conjure up some kind of water-clock? Rats," she cursed as he shook his head, "looks like I don't have much choice - promise you'll be honest?" Jace traced an X across his chest, "Okay then, I find it and it's mine right?"

"If you find it."

"And if I don't?" The treacherous butterflies were stirring again as he regarded her levelly only they weren't butterflies any more, they were phoenixes; *don't blush, please gods don't let me blush* ;

"I'll think of something," several birds of fire exploded in her midriff only to be reborn again as he held out a hand, "so Miss Nalaar, we have a deal?"

Had the Multiverse stopped spinning she wouldn't have noticed; only his hand mattered, an eternity of promises held within its open palm. She should have stepped back, considered all the options in supping with the devil he'd become; instead she felt cooler skin under her own, heard herself say,

"Deal Master Beleren; don't cry when I waltz off with your treasure," and it was done, impulse overriding logic; *I can deal with this - just find whatever he's hidden and everything goes back to normal* . Luckily Jace seemed oblivious to her turmoil and how her fingers tingled as he let them go,

"There might be a few tears if you manage it; do you actually know what waltzing is?"

"Some kind of mincing walk the posh nobs do? Though you'd have to given the dresses they wear, I'd need wheels on the hem to even move in one."

"Believe it or not I've seen that done, and remind me to show you what a waltz is when all this is over. Still, three and a half minutes," she nodded determined as Jace looked up at the ceiling as though seeing beyond it to the stars, attuning himself to the heavens to count time, "starting, now."

If he'd been expecting her to tear off blazing a trail towards this mysterious goal and not caring of the devastation left in her wake he was going to be disappointed. Hard-headed she might be but Chandra did learn from her mistakes - there would never be another

Sanctum of Stars or Purifying Chamber, justified though the latter was. Through trial and tribulation she had mastered her mana and the emotions that channelled it; though she still preferred brute force and ignorance, thinking through and following a plan of action wasn't as alien as it had once been and ironically enough the main trigger for that had been the man she was now competing against. On her second respite stop in the city of Guilds she had been impressed, enthralled even that her landlord had created her first denouement and made it such an interesting read; however after a few days mulling it over that first impression curdled somewhat; she hadn't seen a quarter of what he had and that rankled.

Since then she'd tried to keep her eyes open, understand all of what she saw rather than skim over it and pick out the important bits; it was the reason her later discoveries were better-documented than her earlier ones. That habit of taking a look before starting fires had helped in other areas as well but, as she ungracefully scrambled out from under a low-slung bed with an impending sense of time slipping through her fingers, that old temptation of rushing headlong rose in time with her heartbeat,

"Nothing but dust under there," and comments like that didn't help, Chandra glaring at the passive planeswalker as she hauled herself to her feet,

"Thanks for that," she grated, rubbing a smudge off her face in frustration as she looked around the raided room. She'd methodically searched through his wardrobes, drawers and even the pockets of his hung robes, his bedroom floor a mess as haste left no time for tidiness; she'd feel guilty later. On discovering a small, sealed box tucked away in the back of his bottom drawer she thought she'd struck gold only for Jace to dash that hope, unlocking it with a flicker of mana to reveal a small amount of jewellery, mostly rings, some of which glimmered with mana but were not the elusive trinket she was desperately seeking.

The box had, however, did hold something precious; with his self-mutilated memories Jace had little recollection of his past prior to

Ravnica and within the small clasp locket he'd shown her before was his only portrait of a family he could barely remember. Knowing how important such keepsakes were she'd been exceptionally careful to put it and his other treasures back where she'd found them before upending his sock drawer all over the floor. From there she'd had to get a bit more creative, thinking where she'd hide something important but under the bed and its disappointing lack of hidey-holes was burning a hole in both her ideas and her confidence. Trying to keep her cool and fight off a panicky excitement she looked around the rest of the room for any kind of inspiration,

"How long?" She asked more to break the silence than any other reason but his answer of,

"Two minutes gone," did nothing to settle her nerves,

"You're enjoying this aren't you?"

"No; as the Guildpact I am studiously neutral." To his credit only someone who knew him as well as she did would have caught the very faintest edge of self-satisfaction but catch it she did as she beat a tattoo on her temples,

"Ah, gimme a clue!"

"I'm not breaking our deal," he made less of an effort to hide his enjoyment this time, though the sight of her straightening up suddenly did drain some of his confidence, as did the finger she thrust towards him triumphantly,

"You, empty your pockets"; *huh?* ; his confusion must have been evident, Chandra's glee building as insight mercifully wiped her brow, "you said it was here, not that you kept it here. You've got it on you haven't you?"

Jace glanced down and she felt the heat in her stomach sublime right through her; this was the second time thinking outside the box had solved a puzzle and this time it was one he, not the

planesmaker, had set. The euphoria of her victory drowned out the slight tang of disappointment she'd never know what her fate would have been in Jaces' hands had she failed as, reluctantly, he reached into his tunic. She came forwards a few steps, curious despite herself - what would a man who was virtually the fulcrum of an entire plane, and a populous one at that, consider sacred? When she realised it was a folded sheet of parchment she thought it must be something to do with his work; his formal certification as the Guildpact maybe; until his voice answered her,

"A good guess, I never thought of it, but not quite right. This is something that might be very important, especially if I can get it to work within the next four months, but for now it's just an idea." He offered it forwards and, intrigued, she took and unfolded it, mystified at the symbols scrawled over it before realising they weren't just in Jaces' handwriting,

"Who else worked on this, someone from the Izzet?"

"No, hilarious as that introduction would be - I was talking with Venser last night before we bedded down. Did you know he ignited just after the Mending?"

"No way, he looks younger than Nissa should be, relatively speaking."

"He reckons his spark was mutated by the time rifts around Dominaria; he's from Urborg originally, right in the eye of the proverbial storm. He knows he looks a lot younger than he is, and feels," the mind-mage smirked before turning more serious, "but apart from that he's an artificer, skilled too and he was kind enough to give one of my ideas a once-over. Recognise any of those runes?" Chandra scanned the paper again, this time more closely; to her surprise some of the mystical marks she had seen before but couldn't remember where,

"I know some, can't picture where from though."

"Really? We've used them today at least once; I carved them on Pyronia's first stone." The pieces fell into place,

"Of course, transfer, storage, mana conversion," she ticked off the runes she knew, "so why did you need Vensers' help, your stone works doesn't it?"

"Not as it I'd intended it to," for some reason Jace was looking uncomfortable as he wheedled out his answer, "my original aim with that stone was that it would link to my mind and transfer a thought at near-instant speed but halfway through carving it I realised the matrix I'd tried wouldn't do that. I managed to convert it into the memory stone as a consolation but I've been trying to refine the runework since - hopefully with Vensers' insight I should be able to get it right next time."

"Transferring thoughts that quickly," the idea was bold and potentially plane-shifting; spells of communion were usually rare, highly sought after, forbidden, erratic or some combination thereof; inventing an artefact that could do it would be an achievement to rival his becoming the Guildpact, "you'd be a sought after man if you could do it Jace, for good and ill. Why invent it though, and why link it to your mind?"

"Because I'm used to telepathic contact; if I linked it to someone else how do you think they'd react when a sudden memory popped into their head - they'd think they were going mad. Still it's something for me to work on, and actually something I needed to talk to you about; we, Venser and I this is, may need more raw materials in the near future."

"More of the stone?" At his nod she shrugged, "Yeah I can get that, might need some help lugging it about though, it's heavier than it looks."

"Why do you think I ground it down before I carved it - oh and Chandra," his grin was evil personified, "time's up."

Ti… ; the realisation smothered her in sudden horror before indignation pierced red holes in that cloud,

"That doesn't count, you cheated!"

"How?" He queried, infuriating smile not shrinking one iota, "Did I have you in an arm-lock forcing you to talk to me?"

"But you distracted me!"

"I told you it wasn't what you were looking for; you could have looked and talked." Frantically scrabbling for a loophole Chandra just about resisted the urge to stomp her feet - she hated losing, always had and always would and losing from wandering attention was salt on the pill,

"You, bloody hell," but she couldn't deny it, much as she both did and didn't want to; she did, however, have one card left to play. If she couldn't win she could at least stall for time and score a minor victory before Jace claimed his, prize; *within reason - if he asks, some things I'll just say no, if I want to* ; "can I at least see what I was supposed to be looking for? Actually no," 'inspiration' struck, "I might not have found it but I can trade you for it."

"Oh," Jace's curiosity was as much a vice as her impetuousness; he'd never be able to resist that kind of bait, "colour me intrigued."

"You show me and I'll tell you what Liliana told me last night, about the tangle-wire," she drawled, trying to hide her amusement as his eyes flared, "you know and I know you can't ignore it forever and you can't erase it from your mind while other people know about it. Sounds fair to me; you get rid of a niggle, I see this supposed treasure and gods have mercy on you if it's not that important because I will have none."

"It's important to me and thank you for the reminder," the mind-mage sulked, "I'd not thought about that all night until you turfed it up. Alright but you first; thinking about it's going to drive me mad."

"That's what she said."

"I don't doubt it, swamp-addled cow."

"No, literally that's what she said," despite the axe hovering over her neck from her failed challenge the firebrand couldn't help but smirk at his agog expression, "'look amazed, then ask me really; brooding over what he thinks I've told you will tie him in knots'. So I asked, she mentioned that metal grass and I understood when I saw your face," she sniggered at his agog expression, hoping against hope he wasn't going to take this out on her later, "sorry, I would have told you before I left."

"I'm sure."

"I mean it."

"So do I," his sincerity stopped her feeling hurt, "if it had just been Liliana I'd have been a lot more concerned and for good reason. Still, my turn; it's in that wardrobe."

"It is not," Chandra declared hotly, looking at the state of the floor around it, "I turned that thing inside-out, upside-down and back to front."

"But you didn't look underneath the underneath, and yes I'm adopting that one - covers a lot of different situations and…"

."..even you can't misquote two words," the pyromancer cut him down, already checking for subtle traces of mana as she had before; *nothing, there is just nothing here! If he's lied or tried to joke I've got a lot of fire in my belly and he's getting the lot!* ; "I give up; show me or I turn this room into a smoke-box!"

"You're almost looking right at it," his voice seemed to be closer but before she could check he surrendered the answer, "it's hanging on the door." She glanced at it reflexively, saw there was nothing there and was about to truly let rip before his words echoed in her mind;

underneath the underneath ; she looked again, suddenly burning inside as she realised the door wasn't blank as she'd first thought.

Affixed to it was a small mirror.

Chandras' pulse pounded thickly in her temples; the heat rising from within making it hard to catch her breath, a task then made impossible by the arms encircling her waist as another face appeared in the glass next to her own,

"You had me worried when you thought I had it on me," Jace's words filtered through her curtain of crimson hair, "five or ten minutes ago you'd have been right." Her mouth was dry, she was only dimly aware of her hand rising to the back of his neck; with her brain reeling only instinct was guiding her,

"That's, just," she wanted to say a thousand things but through the flock of phoenixes on the wing all through her only a single thought persevered, "you've got Ravnica."

"Ravnica," he chuckled, the puffs of air against her neck almost buckling her knees; gods how was he doing that? "and I've got eight books, well seven until I get Illustria reprinted, showing the planes you have and even if I didn't it doesn't matter. You've seen more than I ever will and you gave those memories to me, freely; there's nothing I could have worth more than that. You don't *need* anything Chandra," she was coming apart, silently begging him to say no more while telling her everything, "if you're going to call me priceless you'll have to live with me calling you perfect."

The fire roared, the last and hardest person to convince she wanted to hold it no longer finally admitting as much when she turned and smothered his lips with her own. Warnings from her mother, the elder sisters of Keral Keep and everything else vanished as he overcame his shock and she was swept away, lost in a flame she'd never touched before as the kiss deepened. Though they'd kissed to commemorate grateful reunions, melancholy goodbyes, thanks,

teases and a hundred other things since that night in the cellar this was different - she didn't know or care how as long as it didn't stop. She didn't realise how closely entwined they were until something gripped the back of her raised knee and she pushed upwards, leaving the ground and held aloft above him as finally their lips parted, they caught their breath and Chandra Nalaar was left with truths, smelted pure by the furnace of her being, shining in her mind.

Jace Beleren thought her perfect.

She knew Jace Beleren was priceless.

Let everything else burn.

Their eyes met, his questioned and her hands raked his hair, pulling him in with back and neck arching convulsively as butterfly kisses stitched across her collarbone. A keening moan of want reached her ears and she didn't recognise her own voice; she recognised nothing beyond what he was doing and her reactions until suddenly he pulled away. Descending slightly from a plateau of delight Chandra had a vague sensation of tilting and dropping quickly before agony exploded in her jaw and everything flashed grey and white. She flopped limply onto something soft, teetered on the edge of unconsciousness for a second before a strangled gurgle from nearby snapped her back to herself,

"Jace," she tasted blood but swallowed it; she'd hurt when she knew he was all right. He didn't answer and her internal fire, banked by sudden pain, turned cold; she seized it, forcing herself to her knees and a flame onto her palm, trying to see through slightly blurred vision. All was confusion, vague shapes and colours shifting like a kaleidoscope until a hand found her knee and she grabbed it, relief flooding through her as she followed his arm towards where the mind-mage lay,

"What happened?"

"Tripped," he managed, his other hand pressed hard over his face; by the shadows of her fire she looked down his body and saw his legs caught in something; *a robe?* The realisation reignited her cooled flame in a different form, something Jaces' next words didn't help her as he looked up, an eyebrow swelling from where her chin had slammed into it; *why cloaks, why not tunics, they wouldn't have tangled me* ; "I hate fashion, and it's not funny!"

She had no hope, the flame in her hand winking out as she fell to all fours, unstoppable hilarity screaming out of her and Jace left shouting indignantly into a hurricane of mirth,

"It's not, it's, not… oh bugger it all," and it infected him as well; as they'd once broken in sorrow so they did again in joy. Hysteria draining the strength from her arms Chandra felt the mind-mage shiver as he caught her, full-throated mirth belting up his chest as she fell partially onto him almost sobbing with laughter. Thinking about it made it worse, trying to rationalise it even more so; they were in the dark, in the detritus of a bedroom more thoroughly ransacked than if half the Dimir had carried out a house-call, battered, bruised and with nothing but each other. It made no sense, it didn't have to - more than once Chandra thought she'd pass out, only the ache from her stomach and jaw keeping her conscious until she finally rode out the storm and lay in a swoon, heaving down deep breaths and ignoring a last few sniggers.

Gradually sense filtered back to her; her jaw ached both from the laughter and the fall but she'd lived through far worse. The night was cool but only part of her was; as Jace began to recover himself the fire mage rolled away, propping herself on an elbow and smiling fondly as she pictured him in the darkness; *how do you do it Jace? That's the second time you've pulled something like this and both times we ended up in a heap, crying or laughing together* ; the inferno that had consumed her moments ago was now a gentle heat suffusing her; she wasn't sure if she knew what love was but if this wasn't it she'd live without as something in the gloom moved. She said nothing, letting the mind-mage find her; his fingertips met her

elbow and traced upwards, brushing through her hair as she lifted her cheek from her fist to meet his palm with hers; in silence and darkness they held on softly, neither saying anything until he pushed up to mirror her position,

"That's odd," she commented, voice slightly hoarse, "you don't usually make the first move."

"I'm not usually lying on my rolled-up socks." Her breath hitched,

"Please don't make me laugh; I can't take any more."

"First woman who's said that to me"; *damn you* ; she convulsed, her stomach begging for clemency, "are you all right?" She managed to contain herself to a squeak of mirth, just,

"I was the one with the cushion; yeah, I'm fine," her lip had already stopped bleeding and from what she'd seen he'd come off much the worse in their clash of heads; *not for the first time* ; "how are you?"

"Embarrassed; they say if you look to giants you'll trip over ants, trust me to prove them right. Still, not the first time you've blacked my eye; the Guildmeet is going to be interesting next week I can tell."

"It should have gone down by then," she reassured him, a candle flickering on the end of her finger showing his war wound, "I've seen and lived through worse and so have you, hard as that is to believe."

"And what does that - oh forget it," the long-suffering sigh couldn't disguise his affection as he let her hand go to pull himself to his feet, making sure not trip on anything she'd pulled out his wardrobe this time, "just keep that sparkler under control or we'll go up like a bonfire; we're surrounded by my attire and not much of it is flame-proof."

"You think there's clothing out there proof against my fire?" She teased, looking up at his silhouette as the moonlight from the window framed him, "Tell the Izzet to give it their best shot."

"No, just no; the last thing they need is encouragement," his shadow shuddered at the thought before he reached down, "come on, it can't be comfortable down there." An imp of mischief, never far away, bit into her and she let herself fall to the ground, placing her hands behind her head,

"Speak for yourself, no socks on my side." His shadow quivered with strangled snickers before he regathered himself and looked down at her imperiously, grateful once more for his excellent memory,

"Chandra Nalaar I carried you up a flight of stairs to get you here, in the teeth of your opposition I might add," she bit her lip, pulling something over herself childishly before a thrill ran through her; whatever she was holding Jace considered it worthless compared to her, "if I have to pick you up again I'll… actually no, unlike you I don't need violence; I'll just find the nail scissors and give you a short back and sides."

"You wouldn't!"

"Want to call me?" She was seriously tempted but in the end was too content to argue any more, least of all with the man who'd all but bared his soul to her; *and he doesn't know about me - that almost killed him before. Not this time* ; she accepted the help and came to her feet; Jace might have been surprised as she embraced him again but it soon wore off, the pyromancer convinced her blood had turned to warm honey as he held her and she reciprocated, each the others' bulwark against the madness of the Multiverse. She could have stayed there forever; she would have had she known any magic to do so; instead the silence was broken by a quiet voice in her ear,

"Chandra?"

"Hmm?"

"Things aren't the same are they?"

"No, they've been changed a long time."

"Good," his voice was choked, his hold tightening, "glad it's not just me."

"It was never just you; damn it you're going to make me cry."

"Too late for me," he sniffed and she relented in trying to hold back her tears, wondering how joy could be so acute it hurt, "Cha… never mind"

"I mind," she whispered fiercely, pushing back to look him full in the face, "no more of that crap Jace; I've seen what happens when you hold things in, I won't see it again. You tell me everything; I'm not going to laugh or think you're stu…"

He said something; she heard it, understood it and remembered nothing more.

It was so warm and comfortable she didn't want to wake; she refused to open her eyes despite the light streaming through the curtains; slowly the memories came back and she smiled at them all. Swaddled in the thick covers she snickered at the book they'd shared, scowled at the way she'd been tricked by the mind-mages' games, caught her breath at its aftermath before wincing at a phantom pain in her chin. She smiled through the laughter that came after that fall and the tears that fell when they stood back up and then sat bolt upright, covers flying everywhere as she looking around wildly; where was he, where was she?

"Jace," she shouted, the vague smears sorting themselves out into a sort of pattern just as there was a sudden commotion over to her left. Like a breaching whale the aqua mages' head emerged over the side of the bed, his tattoos glowing slightly before he realised there was no threat and dismissed the mana, regarding his summoner blearily through a slightly swollen eye,

"Morning." Her mouth worked once, twice and then a third time, the mind behind it scrambled as she tried to take in this new impossibility; she was in his room, she was in his bed so…

"What the hell are you doing down there?"

"Uhh," he rubbed his eyes before trying to tackle a terrible case of bed-head, something that made the pyromancer both snort in amusement and wince in sympathy, "it seemed like the safest bet after, uh; how much do you remember?"

"Everything," she let her face fall into her hands at the reminder, only just realising she was wearing her usual clothes minus armour, he must have removed that prior to putting her to bed, "you idiot, what possessed you?"

"You told me to be honest."

"I wasn't expecting that!"

"Yes, passing out kind of gave that away."

"That goes no further than these walls," she told him, glowering through her fingers as her face flamed, "Jace look, I love you alright, have since… I don't know, since before I started calling this place home," that was so easy she wondered why she hadn't said it before; was it Naruto who'd said something about doing the impossible? "but I don't, I can't answer…"

"Hold it," he cut her off, his eyes sharper now he'd rubbed the sleep away, "I thought about this after I got you settled in. I don't think you heard what I meant; I should have explained it better."

"Explain? You asked if I'd be your *wife*, what explanation do I bloody need?"

"This one - I didn't propose," he tried not to smile at her gormless expression, he really did but his heart wasn't made of stone, "what I

meant was could you see yourself as my wife *one day* ; I know you Chandra, freedom defines you just like logic does me. I've never loved anyone like you, or loved anyone like I love you but I know if we try this it will be fraught, things will be strange but I'm willing to try. I wasn't setting a date or thinking what flowers to order, I had to know if," it was a struggle but he managed to meet her eyes, "if you see me as I see you, one day in the future."

The red mage didn't reply, actually what she did was very strange even for her; from her sitting position she reclined back onto the bed and slowly rolled face-down; Jace would have asked why had she not snatched the nearest pillow and stuffed it under her head, the muffled scream that rang out a second later echoed by his helpless mirth. He'd thought she'd been joking when she went limp against him; only when a dash of summoned water failed to rouse her did he realise she was truly away with the faeries. Panic had warred with desperate hysteria as he deduced the most likely cause of her faint; the long battle yesterday had taxed her to the limit, especially as she'd been more involved in the actual fighting than he had, and after that a combination of Narutos' revelations, a night of interrupted sleep on the lounge floor, Elspeth's nightmares and all that had happened since had completely undermined her. She had been physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted and his question had been the card that sent the whole house tumbling.

He had no idea how she'd react when she woke up; his best course of action was to let her rest and stay somewhere close by, though not too close in case she woke, got the wrong idea and toasted him before he could explain; *out of sight but not out of mind* . *Good tactic then, possibly a good tactic now* ; he tried to iron his face straight as the woman he loved; and he did love her - this wasn't like it had been with Liliana, it never would be; slowly exhaled, looking up from the pillow and favouring him with a basilisk glare,

"I swear if it were anyone but you I'd be sweeping them up with a dustpan right now," she declared, undone by her grin as his words made her tingle all over; Jace loved her - she could never hear that

enough, "but you're wrong on one count. We're not going to try; we're going to make this work, whatever it is, even if we have to smash it to bits and rebuild it piece by piece."

With the fire glittering in her eyes the last of his worries was consumed and he had never been more grateful; as she reached over he softly kissed her palm before holding it to his cheek, regarding her with nothing but truth etched in his face, his next words the most sincere he'd ever spoken,

"Thank you Chandra."

"Thank you too; come on," she pulled her hand free and patted the edge of the mattress, a teasing lilt in her tone, "I'm getting cold and you're a prettier sight than you were last time you were down there."

"You're getting cold - how do you keep beating me at cards when you can't bluff? And just to set the record straight, four days awake and still standing as opposed to one question and…" he pressed the back of his hand to his forehead, pirouetted and flopped backwards onto the bed theatrically, his dying swan drawing a furious hex from his audience,

"That-doesn't-leave-this-room," she demanded, Jace chuckling as he rode the soft punches and slid beside her, lifting his head to let her slip her arm under it. The two faced each other, glowering shame abrading insufferable smugness until both artificial skins shattered, Chandra slightly the faster to speak as her free hand traced his facial tattoos,

"So, any idea how we start?"

"Odd you should ask"; *you've always got a plan* ; once him always being a step ahead had infuriated her; hell it was the reason she'd lost her first fight against him; how times changed, how much they'd both grown, "I actually started last night."

"Weren't you sharing your lab with Venser then?"

"And he helped; do you remember what I originally intended that memory stone to do?"

"Send thoughts to you," her fingers stopped circling his cheek, clenching into a fist as she went still in realisation, "it was for me wasn't it? You designed it for me."

"In case you needed help," he confessed, holding her stilled hand in his own; she wanted him to be honest, he was starting now, "don't think for a second I thought you weak Chandra; hell you've thrashed me around my own duelling circle enough; but knowing you could reach me if you needed to would have been a weight off my mind." He felt her squeeze his fingers tightly; once she'd have been scornful, trying to see what angle he was working to slip a collar over her neck, now she was not only grateful he'd spend such time and effort on something for her but proud of his ingenuity,

"Mine too; being able to talk to you would have been nice when I was away. Vraska's great but she's not you, plus it could be invaluable in the right circumstance; Jace there's a huge rat throwing black spiky things at me, what do I do?"

"Same thing I do when paralysed in front of a mad witch carrying grenades; pray to whatever god you believe in someone's crazy enough to get in the way," they both shared a laugh at the reminder before Chandra carried on his line of thought,

"But Venser's helped you get it right you reckon - that's a major bonus for us, all of us, if we can coordinate across planes. It'll make working on Naruto's worlds a lot easier for a start; I'd be useless on a plane of ice or water but if I could tell Kiora about it…"

"Exactly, and he's got a few old plans for a planesfaring ship knocking about somewhere so we can have a look at that when our four months is up. I've got until then to work on the rune matrix."

"And I can get you the red stone you need; you really put a lot of thought into this," Jace was humbled by the pride in her tone before

something clouded it, "I need to ask one thing though; I meant what I said last night, about Ravnica. I've got the clothes on my back and half of them I stole, why me - why not Emmera, she's really nice and you get on, or Lavinia…"

Their first kiss had frozen her, the kiss last night had driven her into some kind of frenzy; this one, soft as silk and strong as steel, made her melt, exiling her from reality until she caught her breath and beat off a vacant smile as she Jace spoke teasingly,

"Let me think," he held his hands as though weighing something out, "Chandra Nalaar; we've fought and she's spared me, she's stood side by side with me in the face of a virtual god, seen my worst and accepts it as it is, shares with me memories of places no other human being has been to and literally saved my life twice against the same death-cultist; and yes I do count Naruto's mask; or any other woman in the Multiverse? When's a choice not a choice?" She had to drop her gaze; how could he reduce her to ooze with just his words? "And as for the two you mentioned Emmera's my friend, always will be and the thought of trying anything with Lavinia and having Tajic get hold of me afterwards is so horrible I'll lose sleep over it tonight. Yes, it's that obvious," Chandra gaped and then bit her lip, shoulders heaving as she pictured the slow-brewing office romance he often described in lurid detail, "even Ruric's figured it out and I know for a fact Zarek's been hitting on her more just to rile Tajic up, pot-stirring Izzet bastard."

"Says the kettle; weren't you planning to add a few herbs to their drinks during the Guildmeet?"

"They make very good tea."

"They're aphrodisiacs!"

"A minor side-effect," Jace claimed, not even trying to keep his face straight, "and you know I wouldn't really do it; Ral would, hence why I've sworn the Selesnya to silence."

"Can't you just swear him to silence permanently?"

"My powers aren't infinite, sadly - anyway back on topic I could ask you the same question; why me and not, uh, Gi…?"

"Don't even say it," during their desperate adventure together she had relied on the white mage, come to respect a lot about him and even found him physically attractive but, looking back, it was for the best nothing had come of it - like Jace with Liliana there was just too much distance, "I hadn't seen him in years and we didn't part on the best of terms. And he's a hieromancer don't forget; he honestly believes, or used to, that people need to be ruled 'for their own good' - even now that's never going to fly with me. Wait," sudden suspicion seized her, "did you ask that hoping I'd kiss you?" *You devious git* ;Jace looked like he'd been caught with his hand in the sweetie jar, an expression so out of place and endearing on his usually stoic face she felt mean,

"Not one of my better schemes," he mumbled ashamed, then he blushed as the firebrand leant forwards and did just that,

"Don't stop trying, but you can just ask sometimes," she advised, beaming at the colour in his cheeks highlighting his white streaked tattoos, "so, what now?"

"Well," he drawled, recovering from her boon, "using what happened last time as a reference," he hitched forwards a little, Chandra watching him approach with a mix of trepidation and excitement, "I played my trick last night," another hitch, "we had our heart to heart straight afterwards," and another; he was so close now she could see the individual blood vessels dilating in his cheeks, hers no better as she felt herself flush at his closeness; *he can't, after last night, can he, he's really that close to me?* ; "and we've just confessed we're more than true friends so…"

He drew her forwards, the firebrand wrapping around him tight, her breathing quick as he rested his cheek against hers, trying to clamp

down on her nervous excitement and closing her eyes as she heard his first sweet nothings murmured softly,

."..I'll have unsweetened tea, quick as you can."

As he felt Chandra's face grow hotter, her shaking more violent and her hands form claws in his back Jace bit his lip; he'd taken his life in his hands but if this was his last moment he'd die happy holding her,

"You *ass!* Get off me!" She tried to throw herself backwards and he fought to deny her, laughing even when she forced her way free and latched her hands around his neck, "I'll murder you mind-mage!"

"Promises, promises," he managed from under her thumbs, his insouciant grin all but catching her hair aflame as she swore aloud and pressed harder, love and fury swirling through her together,

"Die, di-no"; *oh sweet irony!* ; "better idea!"

"Wha-ahh! Ow, oww; leave my chest-hair alone!"

As the two planeswalkers came to playful blows dawn broke or days began again on the infinite worlds of the Multiverse and some days dawned brighter than others.

On a plane circled with five suns of concentrated mana two compounds rose together, their daughter watched over by a knight at ease with herself. Upon her arrival she had gone upstairs to see this special child and only hours later had she descended with the child asleep, her eyes wet and her heart restored; she had made the right choice before and she had done so again. Today this family was joined by one old and two new friends, all pitching in to a discussion on the bright future awaiting both their home being rebuilt and the homes yet to be created.

In the slums of the city of Guilds wide eyes were more open than they had ever been; the visitor had believed herself and those of her

ilk untouchable, beyond compare; now she knew they were blessed and spoilt. She saw what it meant to have and be thought of as nothing and, as she swore to her host as a sister-in-tribe, unheard of for one not of her kind, and bade the other woman farewell she silently swore to herself that as she had changed so she would change all those like her she could reach. And if she could help those not like her along the way, so much the better.

A world once at war with itself was at peace; the morning tides were gentle as a man rented a small fishing boat and pushed it off the jetty, his assistant diving in alongside him after throwing some charts and hand-scribbled maps into the vessel. As he rowed and she swam towards the mertrade lanes, talking about what to do, they may have fancied they could hear the distant roar of a beast, or a man who lived as a beast, would make staking his claim on his new territory.

In a decrepit graveyard filled with overgrown tombs and worn headstones a woman laid down an offering of fresh dark roses, the flowers watered by tear drops as she stood and regarded the faded writing on the tablet before her, illegible after more than two centuries wear by the elements. She stood there for a long time until her tears and regret were spent, then she thought over the grave of her long-deceased brother; she had been a healer once, surely there would be somewhere she could quickly find a mentor in the mana of the tundra. It would be a first step along the road that stretched before her but the star that hung overhead at its end, a kinder light than a demons' bargain, was illumination enough to break away from the grave of her past and take the first step towards a future she'd never considered or known.

And somewhere far away a single figure stepped from a place where there was no day or night, only chaos and the possibility of everything, recollected the time that had just past, patted his oldest friend on the spine and was content.

Epilogue

Epilogue - Never 'Walk Alone.

"I still don't like this."

"Come on, you've done it before."

"I know but not to find him - shouldn't we just wait?"

"No, we can't rely on them forever; it's our turn now. You want to see him again right?"

"We all do; all right, let's do this before I have an outbreak of common sense. I'll be in the middle, I'll need all of you who can to channel the mana, I can't control enough on my own. Everyone hold hands and pray Hirin distracts Tiz long enough - if she finds us out here it'll be our necks!"

"I think she'd aim lower; all hold hands," a rough but close circle was formed between seven beings, surrounding the largest of them in the centre as she wrestled down nerves and focused, the spell invented by her father clear in her mind as she carefully assembled the mana her friends collected, framing into a workable whole. Her mind was racing; she had cast this spell before but this was a step into the unknown - it was a big risk but at the same time her brother was right. It wasn't fair to expect the adults to carry all the burden if they could help and it wasn't fair on the one they were seeking to miss the start because of his sketchy sense of time. It was justified recklessness, the legacy of both her parents that let Jayah Beleren speak the last few syllables of her spell, grip the barrier around her and pull it apart, her friends and brother disappearing into nothingness as a small pair of eyes, watching unnoticed from the corner of a doorway, looked up at the legacy of her spell and, showing remarkable sense for one so young, toddled off to find help.

She opened her eyes, saw mist all around her and felt her heart leap into her throat as she realised something had gone wrong,

"Did it work?"

"Where are we Jayah?"

"Can I open my eyes yet?"

"We're in the Eternities," she gasped, dread clawing as her mothers' stories of this place filled her ears, "oh no, oh no, oh no…" Her panic was infectious, several of the younger children sharing looks before one of them, third eldest after the first-born Beleren, took charge to squash it,

"Quiet, all of you; we're going to get out of this. Keep hold of each other, Jayah hold on to me," with both his hands occupied gripping onto the children at his side the boy held out a foot the sitting girl latched on to, "no-one let go, if you do you might get lost. I've been in here before, we all have - just relax, someone will…"

Before he could finish everything rippled, one or two of the children crying out, the impression that something was coming overwhelming as the mists swirled around them,

"It's like a river; don't fight it," Jayah called, closing her eyes, "keep hold of each other, we'll wash up somewhere. Tiz will be able to find us, just stay calm." She wished she could fight her own hammering heartbeat and only hoped she sounded confident as the sensation of the primordial chaos pushing them hither and thither like a cork on the ocean threatened nausea. Here and there she took glimpses, the endless mists just as disconcerting as she remembered them as the current picked up speed; she could only hope they were flowing or being pushed to a safe destination. There was a sudden brightness on her closed eyes, a few of her friends crying out in shock at the light; she opened her eyes just in time to see the brilliant whiteness of a breach in reality before with a jarring thump all eight of them

were cast back into reality, Jayah left gasping as her saviour landed squarely on top of her before pushing himself to his feet,

"Are you all right?" She nodded and scrambled up, repeating his question, "Anyone hurt?"

"Oww," Jayah recognised her brothers' voice, Kerran sounding somewhat squashed, "two Vulshok and a half-elf landed on me."

"No harm done, we landed on his head," a gravelly voice cut off his protests as a half-steel paw helped haul the youngest Beleren to his feet,

"Some friend you turned out to be," he glowered, Marthu not looked the slightest bit chagrined as his younger brother was helped to his feet by Kurissa, the half-elf the first one up, "what happened sis?"

"I don't know," Jayah was already reaching for a solution, glancing around each of them for inspiration, "Volm you know that spell, has this ever happened to you?"

"No," the eldest Sarkhan shook his head, plaited hair swaying as his coal-black eyes surveyed the scene, "but I've not cast it with my father or mother being there and only to find them. I know their sparks better than all others." Jayah nodded, belated fear crawling over her like maggots; *Tiz is going to kill me, then she's going to give me to mum and dad and they'll really kill me!* ;

"Right, everyone stick together," she couldn't change what had happened but she could try and salvage something from it that might keep some of her hide in one piece, "I have no idea where we are or what's out here; I think, I hope we were pushed here by an Eldrazi. Ker you read mums' books all the time, anything look familiar?"

"Uh, yep"; *thank goodness, some good…* ; "him."

I'm popular today ; with age came experience, not that he truly aged any more - still, as time had passed and more work had been done the secondary effects had become more pronounced for those affected by them, or so he was told. The Eternities, and though them the Eldrazi, were all but quiescent, entering the space between planes like pulling aside a curtain when before it had been, to use the colourful parlance of the father of two of the children before him, like breaking through a stone wall with your body. The titans and the broods themselves were aware that things were changing and, having no concept of time, accepted this, their realm as a consequence becoming less hazardous, if still difficult, to navigate - some were even becoming curious to the interlopers, observing as he once had; *and, when needed, putting a helping tentacle in. Still they don't need to know that, and I think they've just seen me - Ker always had sharp eyes. Now what did I said to… that was it* ;

"Well isn't this cosy?" He took an instant to regard the faces before him, seeing familiar features in all of them, "Sorry I forgot to pack a picnic."

"Naruto?"

"Unless you know another blue-eyed blonde who wears my colours?"

"Prove it's really you," one of the children said, holding her bladed switch, a precursor of the stem-staff she would one day carry, as she faced the planesmaker levelly, her pointed ears slightly quivering as several of the other children regarded her amazed, "he could be a clone, they look and smell the same but they cannot bleed." Naruto nodded, biting the edge of his finger to let a bead of bright blood show and assuage Kurissa's fear,

"Good thinking Kur-chan," she tried not to blush, "you should always check things like that all of you; remember everything you see might be real but that doesn't mean it's always true. So, now you know I'm me," the planesmaker drew himself up to his full, if unimpressive,

height, "what made you all plunge into the Eternities like that? You were lucky one of the brood was in the area and I wasn't busy."

The assorted children all glanced at each other uneasily and Naruto touched the metal plate over his forehead softly, having a sudden image of its original owner starting over a desk at him before someone summoned enough courage to answer his question,

"It was my fault," Jayah heard a building hubbub and quelled it with a look she'd learnt from her mother, "I was, well we were trying to find you; we used the spark-sense spell but something went wrong and we ended up there. I'm sorry, none of us meant to disturb you, we just wanted to find you."

"Why would I be angry? I'm touched and don't worry Jay-chan," she glanced away, hair as black as her fathers' falling in a curtain over her face at the nickname, "you found me in the end. Just for the record though using that spell to find me will always drop you into the mist - I'm bound to the Eternities and the spell latches onto that." It actually latched on to something a little more tangible but they could find that out when Jayah wasn't feeling so down, though as one of the three Sarkhans present tutted and turned to his twin he glanced over,

"How often did mother tell us that?"

"Far too often."

"We should have remembered, sorry Jayah," the Ravnican girl smiled before Naruto whistled, regarding the youngster appraisingly,

"You're moving in the right direction if you still want to get that killer look Aron-kun - your plan's still not changed for when you grow up?" The boy, almost the image of his older brother save his hair being ochre and eyes hazel, nodded severely,

"No, though lady Vraska has said I must wait until I'm at least twenty and my parents agree."

"And they should," it had been last year when, having been asked what he wanted to be when he grew up by his favourite uncle, Aron had stunned the Vulshok and all else within earshot when he proudly answered 'a gorgon', "it's not a step taken lightly for you or her. How is your mother these days, and you've a little sister now so I hear?"

"She's well, and we do," it was Aron's sister who answered, Arabeth slightly the taller, slimmer and elder of the two with a habit of answering questions aimed at her brother, "it's everyones' resting day; that's why we came to find you."

"Resting day, already - where does the time go? Let me guess your parents are all or mostly away and you gave your carer the slip," he glanced from one suddenly guilty face to another before chuckling, "nice work, though Tiszta probably wouldn't agree. It was her right, and Melira?"

"She's not here this time, looking after the Hammer for a while," Marthu piped up, his younger brother Rothe nodding but saying nothing having inherited his fathers' more passive side compared to Nurthus' slightly quicker temper, "dad keeps laughing now, a Sylvok helping run a Vulshok tribe; wouldn't have happened when he was my age."

"Time changes everything in time," Naruto quoted sagely before his blue eyes sparkled, "still, now you're here I suppose we'd best wait for the others to find out where you've got to, they're probably already looking. So, actually yes," he took a pace forwards and they shied away; all of them had met the planesmaker and some had even seen him at work - it was hard not to have a healthy respect for someone that powerful even if he was a good friend to their parents, "tell you what, let's do a bit of sparring."

"Sparring; we can't fight you," Volm was aghast at the thought; child of warriors he might be but there was a difference between valour and suicide,

"Of course not, I don't fight much as a rule but there may come a day when you have to so," he shucked off his chained book and the Worldslayer and lay them on the ground behind him, "better to be prepared than not. Kerran I know you never turn down a scrap; you got your mothers' temper as well as her hair," the boy tried not to look too abashed as he scratched his unruly red mop, "how about you first?"

"Sure," he also had his mothers' reckless streak, though thankfully somewhat tempered compared to hers at his age, "uncle Koth taught me some geomancy since I saw you last."

"Good, give me everything you've got and don't look so worried," he smiled gently as the boys' face dropped slightly in alarm, "not to blow my own horn but I deal with supernovas as an occupational hazard; none of you are going to hurt me. Ready," Kerran nodded, mentally recanting all the spells he knew and gathering the mana he could safely use, "let's go!"

Sometime later; he had long ago given up counting specific times as he moved between so many different worlds; Naruto watched the lithe figure before him roll to her feet just as her mother did, regarding him levelly and planning her next moves after he'd blocked and countered her last attack with a soft push,

"Not bad Kur-chan, just stay light on your feet; your weapon's a lot lighter than your fathers, you don't have to plant your feet to use it. Anything else?" He saw the question echo in her expressive brown eyes before she nodded, albeit a touch reluctantly,

"Yes, though it'll take time."

"Plenty of that; take as long as you need," Naruto assured her, watching on intrigued as the half-elf sank into a low, wide-legged crouch, putting a hand on the floor while at the same time staying ready to spring away at an instants' notice. He felt the mana course through her, and not just that used by her father either; *Nissa's done wonders getting her tribe to accept other mana than just the forest -*

hell she's done a lot more than that, least of all the girl in front of me. So, swamp and forest, what's she summoning? ; he had expected a few things, however the squat, powerful shape that sprang into being in front of her and drew gasps from the other children hadn't been on his list,

"Wow," he said, admiring the creature and giving its summoner time to catch her breath again, "spiritmonger right? You bound him yourself?"

"Yes, father took us on a hunt," she said, proud despite herself as she gently placed her hand on the powerful beasts' shoulder and feeling it rumble in contentment, "the prey was female and he took her down, this is her young."

"That's not full-grown?" Marthu was looking at his friends' summon with awe, "And you took it down yourself?"

"Mother helped with the binding but I trapped him," she assured her audience, "he'll grow quickly, more quickly with battle though." She narrowed her eyes and the spiritmonger growled, sensing her rage as Naruto backed up a step,

"This could be tricky; right, have to summon something of my own," he announced, seeing several of them assembled children crane forwards; for some reason most of them were fascinated by the Eldrazi that were his only option for creature-based combat; *still I suppose I was the same at their ages, always wanting the strongest, flashiest jutsus and never thinking about the subtle stuff* ; "let's see what he makes of this."

A small hole burst open in reality and from it came one of the smaller brood from Kozilek's line, about the same size as the young spiritmonger and not powerful enough to unmake the physical world around it. Even as it re-orientated itself to its new plane of existence its opponent pounced, Kurissa giving a whistle and her beast bounding forwards to the attack. Powerful jaws crunched and slashing talons bit home in protoplasmic flesh before the Eldrazi

retaliated, its tentacles and proboscises jabbing into the resilient hide of the beast and sending dribbles of blood to the ground though it came off much the worst. With the cheers and questionable tactics of her friends ringing in her ears the half-elf channelled the power of the wild into her most powerful summon, the spiritmongers' muscles swelling and allowing it to fully overpower the unnatural creature, the Eldrazi showing no indication of pain or suffering as it began to sublime into nothingness. *I won* ; the flush of victory lasted until a sudden touch made her gasp and then giggle, trying to pull the tip of her ear free from the fingers gently teasing it - though not as sensitive as her mother, they were still one of Kurissas' vulnerabilities,

"He's a powerful companion Kur-chan," a voice from just behind her said, Naruto letting her go and watching her greatest summon lick his wounds, "just remember though keep your eyes on your opponent as well as their allies. As I'm sure any of the Sarkhan clan will tell you, a dagger in the dark can be worth a thousand swords at dawn." She nodded, stepping up to pat the spiritmonger on the snout before dismissing him in recognition of her loss; however just as her partner vanished from existence everyone felt a sudden prickling they were all familiar with, most of those assembled glancing at each other alarmed as the Sarkhan twins summed up the sentiment,

"Uh…"

."..oh!"

The planeswalker arrived just before them, the trail blazed by their escapade wide and easy for her to follow even burdened. She took in a breath, then another and then her head snapped up, seeing her errant responsibilities and snarling as she shifted the youngest and most responsible of them in her arms before letting her fury show,

"I was expecting a prank," she confessed as they all scuttled backwards, "I was even expecting a few spells to go out of control, maybe some minor property damage. What I was not expecting,"

she growled, grey eyes burning as the children she'd been in charge all clustered together and tried to look innocent, "was for 'Ringu to come in and say 'outside', and I definitely did not expect to see what I did out there! Jayah, what did you do?"

"We all…"

"Shut up," Tisztas' youngest brother meekly feel silent, Rothe having no defence against her blazing look, "I'll deal with you later - now what happened?"

"I, I tried to sense Naruto's spark," she admitted, trying hard not to cry as she wretchedly realised just how foolish she'd been; she could have gotten them all killed, "I didn't know it would send us to the Eternities Tiz, I'm so sorry."

"Don't 'Tiz' me and save your sorries, I'll be speaking to your parents about this"; *I'm so very, very dead - dad'll kill me and mum'll, well she'll laugh and then ground me forever* ;"and you did more than just pierce the veil. I know uncle Jace has taught you the rules of magic; what happens when you transport physical matter into a non-physical magical media containing physical entities non-specifically?" The girl thought for a moment before paling rapidly, only Volm's hand on her arm steadying her as the full ramifications of her actions crashed down,

"Translocation," she moaned in horror, the planeswalker who was both older sister and aunt nodding, "we didn't…?"

"Oh yes you did; you swapped positions with the closest thing in the Eternities and I found myself face to face with a very confused Eldrazi spawn! Come on, I'm all ears," as the toddler in one arm squirmed she cupped the other around her ear, brushing back her dusty-blonde hair, "what have you got to say for yourselves?!"

"Is the Eldrazi okay?"

Tiszta blinked, dumbfounded to the point she could only answer with a simple,

"What?"

"Well it came face to face with a very confused you," Marthu pressed on before the inevitable happened; as his mother liked to say if the furnace is going to blow you might as well throw more coal on and go to the other side covered in soot, "it might never recover." There were a few choked sniggers at this, least of all from Naruto himself as the planeswalkers' face flashed into a bare-fanged snarl and her grey eyes became incandescent, a slight glow appearing in her left hand as Marthus' expression dropped,

"That. Is. *It!* " She paced forwards menacingly as her brother cringed, trying to hide behind his friends, "No use cowering, dad put me in charge!"

"Not that…"

"Oh yes," he smile was vengeful as she held up the flat steel paddle, "exactly this - come over here Marthu of the Hammer or it'll be…"

"Tiz," she stopped dead in her tracks while Marthu silently swore he'd smelt an image of the planesmaker every day for a moon-cycle if he stopped that dread weapon coming into play, "put the *shiri no roddo* away, at least for today."

"Naruto?"

"Indeed, a little hard to pick out in present company I admit," he said grudgingly, looking at the children of his friends, "seriously I held most of them as babies and now some of them are almost taller than me. You think growing up sucks - it's better than the alternative, trust me!" One or two of them smiled as the planeswalker realised something,

"They actually found you?"

"Of course they did, have a little faith," he replied, stepping forwards to greet the girl and the smaller figure wriggling in her arms, "and let Ringu-chan down, someone else can look after him. Kurama, your friend's here." Smiling, Tiz let the half-moonfolk go as there was a small ripple of mana and the bijuu discarded his book form, pacing over to the child who approached him at a stumbling run,

"'Rama!"

" **Indeed kit**," the bijuu spoke with a vulpine smile, small enough that the son of the soratami he had a very dim memory of could throw pudgy arms about his neck, " **and the rest of you, still getting into trouble I see?** "

"Uh, no," Kerran wheedled, making the summon snort as he flopped down and let the younger child pat his back and ears, "we just wanted to do something for our parents."

"And give me an ulcer," Tiszta remarked cuttingly before looking at the planesmaker again, "they weren't any bother were they; I swear I'd just gone inside for a minute."

"I've heard that before," Naruto mused, looking at the girl who was the dream of an ancient planeswalker given form, though since her spark had ignited she had learnt the truth from her parents. Naruto had been there too and was grateful when her aunt had stepped through her recriminations, saying to Tiszta words she had once said to a knight clad in darksteel and telling her in no uncertain terms who she was; *daughter of Koth of the Hammer and Nurthu of the Helm. Elspeth was always good at aiding others with more than just her mana* ; "usually after you got adventurous and in over your head, especially when said head was under a forging anvil." Tiszta cringed at the reminder before capitulating with a sigh,

"Well they did help I suppose; I'd have looked for you myself when the others came back, uncle Jace found an excellent tavern this year and reckoned it'd be about midday-ish. I left a note for them to redden me when they were in; I'll guide them to wherever their little

darlings ended up unless you could carry them back? We do all want to see you, you are coming?"

"Something tells me I don't have much choice in the matter," the shinobi chuckled before glancing at her, "still we were in the middle of sparring, fancy a bout?"

"No chance," Tiszta snorted, "I didn't take up aunt Elspeths' sword for a reason, a lot of which stands before me trying to look innocent. Carry on thrashing them, and if any of you put a toe out of line no amount of pleading from Naruto will make me spare the rod!"

The sparring went on until the children were tired, Naruto fondly playing ninja and testing each of them to their limits as Tiszta watched from the sidelines and looked after both Hiringumaru, who at four was far too young to compete, and Kurama, who had his head in her lap and was enjoying the attention. *Such a tart* ; the shinobi scoffed lightly, preparing to change hiding places again as he felt the tickle of a detection spell; *nicely done, Chandra taught her well. Can't believe I forgot it was resting day - nice to know even those who can't 'walk as their parents do care enough to try and find me* .

It had been ten years, give or take, since the battle of Ilyonde and in that time much had changed, most of it, thankfully for his peace of mind, for the better compared to what it could have been. Those he considered friends were all happy and had, to different degrees, helped ease his burden despite having their own lives; some of the planes he had visited after they were done honestly made him break down in tears, his task validated. Together the planeswalkers had done great things and fostered new ties with not just each other but the planes themselves, though as they now knew 'planes' was slightly the wrong term; the Multiverse wasn't layered like a sandwich, it was more like each plane existed within a bubble of reality within the Blind Eternities. He had made more of these bubbles over time and would one day recombine them into a greater

whole but that was a long way off; instead he focussed on smaller gains such as the tradition he was now part of.

Every year, to commemorate the first meeting they'd had four months after beating him at Ilyonde, all the planeswalkers who could make it gathered with their families for a day-long celebration, usually on either Ravnica, Mirrodin or, more recently Illustria. The general structure was that the adults would share a midday meal while the children old enough to do without them a few hours were left supervised with relatives, usually Melira, Kiora or Tiszta, and following that meal the rest of the day was spent together. It was a day to strengthen ties, share news and discuss future plans and, for Naruto, a day to set down his task as the planesmaker and be amongst people who knew who he was. It was the day he looked forwards to more than any other and was always a surprise when it came around, and as he heard Tiszta shout suddenly he realised the time for the reunion was probably nigh,

"Times up; you all lose," there was a collective groan as the children on the hunt for him slouched back towards the planeswalker with a polished red stone in her hand, the legacy of ingenuity now allowing planeswalkers to share their thoughts across the Multiverse as its inventor had originally intended, "Naruto, come out."

"Right," he hopped down from the tree he'd been hidden in, eliciting a few gasps as all of the children had looked at that spot a dozen times, "and no I wasn't using mana to hide; sometimes your eyes will tell you more than any spell. Underneath the underneath don't forget," he told his listening audience before beckoning them away as Tiszta placed the stone away and concentrated, "now give Tiz some room, we have no idea how many are coming in."

The light of Mirrodin ; as he watched the girl begin to glow with an ethereal radiance he had to hide a smile; *perfect title considering what her spark can do - not sure if that was the aim of Phyrexia or because she formed in the Eternities but either way it's useful, and fitting* . In his changed vision the adopted Vulshok pulsed like a

bright star, the power of her spark unleashed through the Eternities like a lighthouse leading lost ships home, a signal any within the aether could see and home in on. Following her ignition after years of working hard to see Mirrodin restored to its original glory, a process still ongoing in the wildest regions, Tiszta had been helping her parents, aunts and uncles as Kiora had in younger years - when most of your family was made up of planeswalkers, an interplaner childminder was a well-valued commodity. Under her guidance he sensed presences incoming, then the veil parted and several of the children assembled called out in joy to the quartet of figures that appeared, though these faded a little at their parents expressions until,

"Hey trouble," the youngest of the arriving 'walkers broke the tension, her little brother running into her arms with his bijuu friend trotting behind,

"Is'ta!"

"You bet," the mergirl was now a mermaid and, as the man beside her had once warned her adoptive father, a heart-thief through no fault of her own. Tall for her race, Kiora scooped the youngster up after kneeling to field him, her face reflected the eyes he'd inherited from his mother as she nuzzled him nose to nose before holding him at arms' length,

"You're getting so big now. Blow bubbles," giggling, Hiringumaru blew a small raspberry before trying to pop the ones his big sister blew, those who'd arrived with her left trying to look stern under the onslaught of cute,

"Dare I ask? Oh," Jace noticed the figure stood slightly apart and sighed, "don't tell me you've started corrupting them Naruto; we've got enough trouble stopping Liliana digging her claws in." He shot a glance at his daughter and Jayah blushed red, knowing exactly what he was referring to; *but she said she knew someone who channelled both your manas - how was I supposed to know she meant Niv-Mizzet?* ;

"Charming; as soon as something goes wrong blame the little guy," the shinobi responded, folding his arms at them all, "and just for the record you should be proud, well, nearly proud," he amended, each of the 'walkers swapping glances; they'd heard that tone before, usually preceding something enlightening or embarrassing, "your little ones got it right to get here but during our spars they didn't quite grasp it as you did. Care to show them how it's done before we get going?"

The challenge was answered by the butt of a spear striking the ground, the man pacing forwards not one of the original thirteen but absorbed into the growing ranks of the planesculptors, as Kiora had named them ten years ago, after Chandra had stopped trying to flambé him for that messy business on Zendikar. As three of his children, the fourth and youngest awaiting his return with his blooded, watched on Sarkhan Vol paced forwards and nodded respectfully towards the planesmaker,

"Naruto-khan"; *one habit I can't break him of - still, beats gaki or baka I suppose* ; "it will be good to cross spears with you again."

Even as they looked from the dragon mage to his opponent Naruto was in motion, a puff of smoke and blur of steel resolving into a figure familiar to the Vol children, each of them shying away from the nezumi who emerged from the smoke,

"Five swords," Volm whispered, ashen-faced,

"He looks ridiculous; surely he…" At the nudge in his ribs Marthu fell silent, wishing the earth would swallow him as each of the dragon shamans' children regarded him as though he were profoundly stupid,

"That stance," it was Aron who spoke, his tone drenched in respect towards Splay-Paw, "has held off my mother, father *and* aunt Melira together if no mana is used; I've never seen anything so dangerous. It may look, unorthodox," that was putting it mildly, apart from his

hands and tail the rat-man held a blade in his teeth and was balanced on one leg to hold the fifth in his left knee, "but it's deadly."

"Children," at their fathers' bark Volm, Aron and Arabeth stood straighter and obeyed; their father loved them but, like their mother, he was strict when it came to fighting, "watch a hopeless battle." Setting his spear and channelling his mana knowing it would likely do him little good the Tarkiran nodded then flung himself to the side as a ball of fur and razor-edged death cart-wheeled towards him at breakneck speed.

Okay, definitely not ridiculous ; to Marthu uncle Vol was a good friend of his father and frequent visitor of Mirrodin; he'd seen him spar with aunt Elspeth several time and knew aunt Melira had been trained by them both so if there was one thing Sarkhan Vol was not it was a pushover. However the fight, if it could be called that, between the dragonmage and the nezumi lasted less than half a minute and forever dispelled the notion that the smallest of Naruto's masks was not a dangerous opponent, most of the children taking a pace back as Splay-Paw leapt acrobatically backwards off Sarkhans' chest, letting the taller man retake his feet. After clenching his fist in salute to the victor the shaman set his stance again, regarding the onlookers with a slight smile - things would be different this time,

"Now see how you fight such a battle." He beckoned the nezumi in again and the instant the flensing machine rushed towards him again a shout came from behind, a translucent shield flying up from the ground,

"Got your left Sarky," he grimaced at the nickname but as the curtain of water bent but didn't bow under the points of the flashing daggers he was grateful, completely disregarding his defence on that side as he looked to press his advantage. Rebuffed, Splay-Paw set himself to defend as the man advanced, the shield keeping pace with him as Kiora rolled under the soil, her first unique spell by now so instinctive she could maintain it through her feet while playing with her little brother,

"Duck," he obeyed and the rat-man was forced to leap aside from a bolt of force, just as planned as his feet were suddenly caught in a sticky morass, the ground he landed on sucking him in and stopping his treasured mobility. He threw two of his blades to try and ward off his aggressor but to no avail, Sarkhan shielding himself with dragon scales and the tip of his spear was at the nezumi's throat, Splay-Paw dropping his other blades as the shaman removed it and spoke to the onlookers, smiling slightly,

"You fight such a battle together."

"Right-right," his opponent chittered, heaving himself out the swamp as its creator released her mana from within it, "you had friends in sparring but none used them." There was a collective groan, especially from the victors' family before eventually one of them spoke,

"And we've been told that how often?" Arabeth asked her brother forlornly before from a cloud of smoke Naruto answered,

"Being told isn't the same thing as seeing and trust me your parents were harder than anything to convince - if any of them tell you otherwise ask about Ilyonde."

"He's right," Kiora chipped in, "I was only a bit older than most of you but even I could see it was nearly impossible to get planeswalkers to work together; still is in a lot of cases." *Oh really?* ;

"Don't look so down kids; tell you what, Kurissa's shown me you can handle it so who wants to bind an Eldrazi?"

" *No!* "

"Was that a unanimous negative?" He didn't even try to hide his laughter as the five planeswalkers glared death at him, "See Kiora, it's all about asking the right questions." The mermaid scowled, realising she'd been had and falling back on her one advantage against the planesmaker,

"Still taller than you."

"Likely for a long time; anyway, time's wasting; Ravnica ho and let's get going."

This was met with general approval, each of the children moving towards their own parents or, in the case of temporary orphans, those aunts or uncles they knew best, an exception to this rule glancing up at the figure who held his hand and trying hard not to blush,

"Uh, nice, ah, nice swamp lady Vraska."

"Thank you," the gorgon appreciated his compliment as Kurissa took her other hand, the child of the elf she considered a sister happily recounting how her spiritmonger had banished an Eldrazi, "though what was agreed between your parents and I still stands regardless of flattery." He had no hope at that compliment, going crimson as his friend snickered from Vraskas' other side and his father spoke,

"All ready?"

"We'll just be a moment," Jace said from beside the planesmaker, raising a hand to his children as they held on to Kiora, "I need to speak to Naruto, we'll see you there. Look after your mother for me."

"We will," his son assured him, the mind-mage smiling as he glanced away as his friends and family; *no, Chandra was right - it's the latter* ; disappeared through the Eternities and a long-awaited celebration, his reverie disturbed only by a sigh from his side,

"They grow up so fast."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" The Ravnican snorted gruffly, mostly unchanged by the turning of the years save for the first grey hairs appearing, "Two of them are mine after all."

"Two and a half last I heard," Naruto glanced up at him slyly, "life in the old dog yet, though you're still behind sword-and-spear, though sadly not in the literary stakes. Thok must have been a lot more popular than I'd guessed, a lot of people were put out he only got a bit-part in the follow-up."

"He got a good wedding though," Jace pointed out reasonably, remembering the opening pages of *Sword and Spear* before snickering, "good night after it was released as well from what I heard. It took her a while to forgive Elspeth *Sword and Hammer* 's dream-scene but Nurthu's a big fan of yours."

"As are most of you; don't think I don't know your copies are well-thumbed," the planesmaker said warningly, "and I know for a fact Lili's kept a copy of *Beast and Beauty* on her since she started her journey. Is she coming by the way; I haven't seen her in a while."

"She's already there; never misses a trick that one," what had once been anger and disdain had, over time and trial, matured into acceptance and respect even if his one-time lover did have her irritating habits, "won't have any of her own so she has her fun trying to corrupt mine. Honestly when that bloody invite from the Izzet arrived for Jayah I thought they'd be picking pieces of the Guild up all over Ravnica by the time Chandra was through, and the tongue-lashing she gave the pair of them - even I was cowering and deal with the Guildmeet!"

"Why'd she shout at Kerran?"

"Not Kerran, Liliana," Jace corrected him, remembering the evening meal in his house that night with a shiver; Chandra's fury had been all but striking sparks off the walls, so heavy it seemed to be pushing their daughters' head under the table, "sometimes I swear you must have a hand in keeping them both reasonable friends."

"Not anymore; I haven't looked to the future since before Ilyonde, I told you that at your wedding," that was another treasured memory, visions of the bride and grooms' face dropping as he met their

suspicions of cellar-based matchmaking with an easy shrug and declaration that he'd just said as he'd seen it at the time; *and to be honest I thought murder was the more likely option* ; "and speaking of which you have no leg to stand on calling Lili cruel. Getting that poor little elf to marry you, the Guildpact, off on her first real ceremony; there's mean and there's mean!"

"It was Chandra's idea," the mind-mage defended himself, "she was always fond of Auriea and we invited her to the reception, or some of it at least. Anyway it also stopped the Guilds moaning I was showing favour to the Selesnya; she married me because she was my former employee, not because of what Guild clothes she wore. Luckily Lavinia was able to keep a lid on them all while we were on our honeymoon…"

"Not for long afterwards though, and that was definitely you," Naruto chuckled, remembering what the Guildpact had done with his wedding gift; *that was supposed to be a one-off publication after the arrestor handed out copies of Ice and Fire to the whole Guildmeet under the 'other business' heading - trust you to turn the trick back on her* ; "still, going by the two godchildren you've now got it worked."

"It did; *Book and Blade* was such a hit it had three extra print runs, one of which I'm sure was brought solely by Ral Zarek," remembering the Izzet planeswalker who had turned down his offer to join the planesculptors in favour of finding new and more creative methods of blowing things up always made Jace antsy; like most of his Guild Zarek was flighty, arrogant and impossible to trust, "Tajic took it reasonably well, though Lavinia's still after your head."

"Making Naiavil look sexy in glasses shouldn't justify a writ of summary execution, and speaking of which why haven't you overturned that writ yet?" The Guildpact snorted,

"If the arrestors catch and contain you they'd deserve to take your head; you've broken into my house often enough. They were at our

meal just now actually, though Tavina and Razeal were with their grandparents rather than Tiz, just as well as things turned out."

"Too right, that would have been an interesting conversation," though knowledge about planeswalkers was becoming slightly more common it was a very gradual process; out of the Guildmeet, for instance, Jace had let only Lavinia, Tajic and Zarek know his secret and even then none knew about his wife, "you should be proud of them all trying to help and it was good to see them again even if every time I see Kurissa-chan I wince a little."

"You're not the only one but it was - don't laugh - a big thing Nissa did having her, last in a long list of big things now I think of it. She's been all but canonised by the Golgari you know?"

"Really? For those plants she brought in?"

"Wiped out hunger in the undercity," Jace confirmed, remembering his confusion a month or so after Ilyonde when a packet of wrapped leaves had been passed to one of his staff with a note; *give these to Vraska - tell her I understand now, the flower matters less than the fruit. They certainly did to the Golgari* ; "Vraska swore her into the Guild as soon as she saw her at our first meeting, empowered by all their Beggar Courts. I was surprised she said yes to be honest, even more surprised when we all found out why."

"True, a bloodless revolution; well, nearly bloodless," Naruto corrected himself, "the whole Joraga council, beat the lot after they wouldn't listen to her. Guess it is true, nothing beats arrogance like a punch in the chops."

"A dosage repeated as necessary," the mind-mage agreed, remembering the fights with a wince, "she learnt some of those techniques off you didn't she?"

"Well Mel did promise her a rematch," Naruto reminded him before snorting, "besides that wasn't the only thing she learned from Ilyonde."

"The hunt the year afterwards?" Jace snickered at the reminder, having been there when the one Nissa had manipulated; *sort of, he had her respect since that day, and it was the best way to teach the Joraga there are those who aren't elves worthy of their respect and more* ; arrived in his front garden desperate for advice, "Oh to have been a fly on the wall when she dropped *that* curtain!"

"Don't be cruel," despite himself Naruto couldn't help giving his point of view on something he'd heard only second-hand, "though I could picture some of it; 'Garruk, glad you accepted my invitation to our annual hunt and even gladder bringing back that chromatic snake alive won it, even we thought it was just a myth. Ah, yes, the prize; well about that, you're now a great hunter and as a shaman I have to pass my bloodline on - can you see where this is going?'"

"We know where it went," Jace was doing his best to keep his face straight; despite their differences he had a lot of respect for both the Wildspeaker and the Revane leader, "Zendikars' first half-elf, and better all around as far as Nissa sees it. I know Garruk keeps returning and taking them both hunting, Kiora too if she can make it - Joraga men aren't part of their childrens' lives at all usually, apart from providing food."

"A change for the better then, maybe," Naruto mused, "Kurissa certainly got the best of both of them, unfortunately for you."

"Thank you for that, I'd just buried those flashbacks," the Guildpact glowered, irked by one of his most embarrassing memories, "her reactions, his muscle and just the right height to make them count. There's no way a five-year old should hit that hard, I was walking stooped over for a week!"

"So was Chandra, I thought she'd die laughing," Naruto recalled with grin, "and honestly anyone stupid enough to shout 'boo' behind a Zendikarian deserves everything they get."

"I said excuse me; I just wanted to move past and she forgot I was there," Jace reminded him, despising how the incident had quickly

been spun into something it wasn't; *mostly by my supposed-beloved!* ; "she was so contrite no-one could shout at her, me least of all."

"Just as well given you were a falsetto at the time," Naruto said snarkily, "though Nissa's not the only one who can set up a good story; must be something to do with Zendikar. How long was Kiora under your bed after that picnic?" The reminder made Jace groan,

"Don't, just don't; I've not seen Gideon angry often but that was the worst. She had good intentions, I'll give her that, but the execution could have been better."

"I don't know, it worked in the end; genius, madness and success and all that," Naruto defended the then-mergirl, "and she was right in what she told Kaguya-san; it's not that he won't hurt her, he *can't* hurt her; it's just not in him. That and the fact she liked fishy anyway meant she never really had a chance, and good for her - she deserves a happy ending after everything she went though, though having said that so did all of you." Despite himself Jace laughed,

"You're good at those, though I can't believe you made *Whip and Wave* a tear-jerker; that accident when Rioka's trying to run away from those orphanage people changes everything. I didn't realise the book Arju was reading at her bedside was the law on adoption until the fourth time I read it; made me cry all over again. Speaking of that one though," he cast out a hopeful line, "are we likely to get the sequel any time soon? I know quite a few people who'd read the return of the Multiverses' most cock-blocked man."

"He got lucky once," Naruto pointed out; despite having his mothers' eyes and her wonderful vision Hiringumaru, like Kiora, was a Jura through and through, "and I am working on it but it's not easy, might even slew the series in a whole different direction. For a start it'll have to be a cross-over, for a second I don't have as much fun with Kaguya as I do with you lot given her history and lastly it's not easy to, write someone out, you know?"

Jace did, placing his hand on the planesmakers shoulder,

"I miss him too," the mind-mage said quietly, "I can't say he was like a father to me but when he was being serious, admittedly not often, he was the best teacher you could ask for."

"He reminded me a lot of my godfather, the one whose books inspired Herotica," Naruto admitted, remembering the first of the planesculptors to pass away, "good at his job but irreverent with it, knew how to have fun. It's Tami I feel sorry for; they were great friends and I know it hit her hard even if they were both preparing for it - time's one force I can't meddle with and even if I could I wouldn't."

"None should," Jace agreed before brightening a little, "still, hands on *Sojourners'* helm and knowing he'd helped put one of his closest friends at ease for good - apart from having Tamiyo in his lap I can't think of another way he'd have wanted to go. And she's never alone, not on that ship," he recalled the planesfaring *Sojourner*, Vensers' dream made real after years of diligent study and construction in the depths of Urborgs' swamps; much like the communications stones, Jace had played a hand in its realisation and upon its creators' death it had been bequeathed to his best friend, "there's always at least one of us with her and it'll always be Tiz's dream to captain it. Koth says she's already counting the days before she can sign on and until then Ajani pretty much lives there, says he's getting too old to 'walk."

"Anything for an easy life; glad that he and Elspeth kept in contact though, and that he agreed to help. He knows a lot of different places and the mana he can use makes seeding planes easy," Naruto had met the leonin several times and was grateful they'd all been peaceful; as he had sworn to never meddle as he had before there were several planeswalkers he didn't know and therefore he was always cautious when a spark glowed in his changed eyes, "just as well given what you buggers did on Illustria. Really if Elspeth was surprised I was gobsmacked; I should have been suspicious when you had us all board the *Sojourner* ."

"Chandra promised she'd help and she held to it, we all did; the hardest bit was keeping Elspeth from finding out, though luckily

Sarkhan made that easy."

"Almost too easy," Naruto snickered before catching the Ravnicans' suspicious glance, "don't even go there, I wasn't the one who found him. Blame Garruk for that, though I'm sure Liliana wasn't that happy when he turned up on the Heliod temple doorstep with a mad old-looking man in tow; if he'd have been carrying a saucepan it'd probably have triggered bad memories." It was Jaces' turn to snort,

"True but he did recover under her hand…"

"Before and after you pair found him."

."... and considering he tried to eat Chandra and I last time we crossed paths some minor singeing and a few scrambled brains were the least he could expect," the Guildpact amended smoothly, "though we did apologise when the bandages came off."

"True, though I reckon he still bears a grudge you cost him his whiskers; can't think why, wish I could get rid of mine," Naruto groused, scratching one of his marked cheeks before glancing up at the taller man, "even if he's a solider though I didn't expected those two, especially so quickly. It was what, six months between meeting and blood-swearing - I didn't even know they were together until it was over." Jace snickered, channelling more than just his mana as he called upon a memory; *I only wish you were here to tell him yourself old friend* ;

"Neither did anyone until Venser outed them; this is how he told it to me word for word," as Naruto glanced up amazed the mind-mages' eyes glowed bluer than his own, "picture the scene, we've got the *Sojourner* overhead and there's me and Tami down along with Ajani. We meet up with Elspeth and the fire-breather and meet Melira just as we get into the main Hammer village, now a lot bigger given the repairs they've done. We're sat around Koths' table, Nurthu with Marthu being a nuisance when she notices Elspeth glancing at him and asks if she wants to hold him. She politely declines; sensible given Vulshok are born throwing punches and small fists still hurt

when they're made of metal; and Nurthu makes a comment about how she's missing out. Of course given the conversations we've had through our communication stones, and remind me to carve Sarkhan's rune onto mine when I get a minute, that's where I have to step in; she's missing nothing I say, she's taking part in a classic love story. Girl has squire, squire meets boy, boy trains squire, girl finds out, girl forbids training, boy and squire get clever, girl finds out again, girl gets mad, boy says something rude, girl asks squire to leave, boy and girl fight, boy and girl collapse exhausted, girl agrees boy can train squire, girl and boy train squire, girl and boy fight, girl and boy fight, girl and boy fight, wise old man arrives, wise old man sees grass and mud stains on girls' cloak, wise old man guesses how they were fighting, girl goes crimson and boy kisses girl to prove wise old man right! And wouldn't you know it she does, so does he and I honestly thought Elspeth must have slipped or thrown her cloak off; I was expecting her to swing at me for the joke!"

Naruto smiled but didn't laugh, instead looking up at the clouds drifting lazily overhead; *sounds too much like you, and Jiraiya for that matter* ;

"He always did have a knack for insight," the planesmaker recalled, "I know Sarkhan's on Mirrodin a lot anyway because he gets on with Koth, he met her there didn't he?"

"Apparently so, actually he met the squire before he met the knight. He taught her a few things and Elspeth found out after she realised why Melira's blade-work was a little odd - she was getting too used to fighting a spear. They didn't see eye to eye about training so Elspeth banned them; Melira couldn't talk to him and he couldn't approach her - next day she goes to the training field and sees the two of them sparring again; Sarkhan was playing defensively and correcting her while Melira fought silently and she took it out on him and from there, as Venser would say, to eternity."

"Or at least to the Illustrious two," Naruto quipped, shoving the mind-mage lightly, "still can't believe you threw your other half into the maw for that one."

"She did a lot of the work, in fact most of the work," as they had all gathered on the bridge of the *Sojourner* above the world Chandra had directed them to he would never forget the look she'd shot him as, having taken Jayah off her hands, he pushed her in front just as a heavily pregnant Elspeth was led up the stairs by her blooded, "it was only right she got to pull the curtain down."

"True enough, though be grateful Elspeth was carrying the twins or she might have been wearing her armour still. Chandra would have ended up a red patch on her breastplate, which probably isn't the worst way to go now I think about it."

"Rather you than me to tell Sarkhan that but Illustria was important for all of us. It took us over a year but we did it, we made that plane live and not just for Elspeth," the planesmaker accepted the backhanded compliment with a grateful smile, remembering the tears he'd shed in time with the knight as he saw the birds circling over head, the herds of deer, the life given to his work a gift by those who could have hated him but did not, "though staying there until she had Aron and Arabeth took bottle from both of them even if it meant they were the first Illustrian-born. Nice of Liliana to step in and help, though acting as midwife might be the reason she swore off having any of her own; well, that and her goal. Tell me Naruto," Jace looked severe and, respecting this, the planesmaker gave him his full attention, "can she do it? I only ask because I suspect we only managed because all of us were there and regardless of what's happened before I won't have her waste her life chasing the, though I don't like the word, impossible."

Naruto thought about this for a moment before, to the mind-mages' horror, his face darkened and he shook his head,

"I had a thought you'd see it first; yes it is impossible to cast that spell alone but," he raised a hand, "that's where I step in. If Liliana truly wants it and she does master all mana as she has that of tundra, ocean and fell I will teach her my kage bunshin; five of them, each one channelling a colour of mana should be enough. She'll do it alone, though when she does she'll need you all more than ever."

"How?"

"I've read the account she did Jace, it still exists," despite his new goal Naruto still had a weakness towards powerful, flashy techniques and anything that could break his aspect of annihilation was certainly that, hence his research, "according to the records the one who cast it during the invasion died, not because of it, but because of what happened afterwards. I'm not sure if it's because of the spell or something else that happened but from what I read it seemed they simply slipped away, forgot to eat or drink and drifted off. It'll be up to you and the others to save Lili should that happen again."

"We will"; *and that reminds me* ; "and Chandra asked me to say this but it comes from all of us Naruto - thank you." He looked confused,

"For what?"

"For everything," Jace raised a hand, clear azure mana twisting around it, "with your permission?"

Curious the shinobi nodded and felt the fingertip touch his brow, just above his head band and concealed gaze as he allowed the mana to infiltrate his mind, form a coherent picture from his memories and see…

… the smile on the face of the kneeling Wildspeaker was driving his opponent to fury,

"Fall, over," Kiora yelled, heaving against his side, "come on, I really want to hunt a kraken!"

"If you can knock me down I will hunt with you small-claw."

"And you'll stop calling me that as well, I'm not little any more," the mergirl demanded and Jace had to concede she was right - it had been a few months since she'd cowered under his bed while he tried desperately to calm down her raging guardian but she had put on

several inches of willowy growth since. After passing the man who'd been attempting to leather his adopted daughter to within an inch of her life a drink he was forced, as he often was for both his wife and his little girl, to call playtime to an end,

"Time."

"Aww," Kiora slumped to her knees and looked crushed before a massive paw gently patted her head, "don't start, I still can't do it."

"You'll need to hobble greater prey than me if you would hunt the ocean Kiora," Garruk warned her, his tone laced with respect for her attempts - she was growing as strong as he'd suspected she would and, as he put a hand on his knee and a sudden impact made him wobble dangerously, more cunning as well.

"Lampreys," she swore, prostrate after springing up for a drop-kick, "thought that wou - uh oh!" She scrabbled away belatedly but far too late; Garruk had already recovered his balance and the mergirl squawked as he hoisted her into the air by an ankle, meeting her perpendicular grin with a stern scowl before glancing away and smiling evilly,

"Swim fishy."

"What - no," he heard Gideon chuckling as the taller man paced towards his goal, Kiora flailing frantically as she saw what he was heading towards, "help, he's gonna dunk me!" No aid was forthcoming, something that made Jace glance over with a smirking smile,

"Not looking to save her?"

"After the trick she pulled on Kaguya and I she deserves to be dunked," Gideon smiled vindictively, Jace recalling the tale the mortified sun mage had recanted to himself and his wife with Kiora trying desperately to shrink into the wall as Chandra stood between the two, simultaneously amused by the younger planeswalkers'

antics and proud she'd been so creative, "I know she won't drown, mores' the pity."

"You heartless parent." Gideon snorted,

"You've got this to come Jace; Jayah might be young but she'll get clever when she's older, and don't think for a minute she won't turn heads if she takes after her mother."

"Don't, two firebrands in the family is the stuff of nightmares; Garruk," the Wildspeaker paused, his prey looking relieved at the reprieve, "not the fish pond; she might still be salty."

Gideon inhaled half his water, Garruk likewise chuckling as the mergirl shot the mind-mage an upside-down look of betrayal followed by a rude gesture - though she was eventually able to look back and laugh at the statue of Ula being made from pure sea-salt and unable to be moved from her submarine shrine, having fallen into a pit trap full of the abrasive crystals there was an insult that still rankled,

"You're playing on the edge there Jace," Gideon warned him, wiping his face and proud his daughter was still fighting with legs, fists and tail thrashing against Garruk's iron grip, "if you wake up in a bubble some fifty feet in the air don't come running to me."

"I'm sure she wouldn't kill me."

"No but it's when she's trying to help you want to be worried. I wouldn't have minded but she made it sound like she was dying on Kaguya's plane; I 'walked there so fast I flattened my nose against a larch!."

"Don't be too hard on her; Kaguya-san enjoyed your meal together didn't she? You know what Nissa would say, anything that breaks down a shell is a good thing and you seem to be wearing hers away quite nicely. I go to her plane when I need a little peace - did you see what it was before?"

"Massive swamp wasn't it?"

"It was, I was there within a month of Naruto making it - seeing what she turned it into proves if there's a plane he's made she can't make something grow on I've not seen it yet. So, have you talked about the ceremony yet, or names for the children?"

Gideons' flat glare told more than a hundred denouements could before it suddenly shifted and he nodded behind the Ravnican. Seeing what he was gesturing towards Jace couldn't help but smile as he saw the two beings he held dearer than anything else in the Multiverse, one of whom had proven his fears groundless and the other who'd made his entire existence bright. He had thought it would be a sacrifice for Chandra to finally give up her life of travel and it had but she, and he to a lesser extent, had adapted - they had sworn they would make it work and they both held to that promise and later their vows. She still explored, both with and without Vraska depending on the gorgons' timetable with her Guild, but rather than hunt down Naruto's planes she was now discovering how they could truly realise the planesmakers' vision and, as she confessed to him privately over a game of chess and a good book, help bury Elspeths' ghosts for good by putting that knowledge to good use.

She was gone days rather than weeks or months and it worked, it worked so well they'd announced their engagement at the end of the first meeting of the planesculptors and given Auriea the shock of her life some three months after that. Now he was a father, the beautiful infant holding her mothers' hand named after the most famous pyromancer of the Multiverse, founder of the monastery Chandra herself had studied in and there wasn't a day, not a single one, where he wasn't thankful for such blessings. This thankfulness quickly had him narrow his eyes; even at this distance he saw his wife looking upset and he wasn't standing for that. Leaving Gideon with a nod the Guildpact swiftly approached, dropping to a knee to hoist his baby girl off her feet with one arm and while the other found Chandras' shoulder,

"What's the matter?" She swallowed before facing him, her hand coming up to cover his own before she answered, happy and choked at the same time,

"I'm just," she paused and he got the feeling she was thinking how best to say something, "look behind you Jace, what do you see?" He did and, despite himself, smiled,

"I see a mergirl trying desperately not to get upended in our water butt," he joked before turning back as Jayah hugged his neck, "but you always saw more than I did." She chuckled then his free arm was around her waist, the Beleren family together as she embraced her husband and daughter,

"Family, Jace; people I'd give everything for and who'd do the same for me," she breathed raggedly, the Guildpact holding her closer as he understood, "I thought I'd lost mine in fire and I'd never want another, remembering hurt so much."

"Shhh," he breathed, feeling her shiver against him, "you're right Chan; come on, no need to cry, or make me cry either," he heard her laugh and held on until she twitched to get away, her eyes sparkling as she winked at him,

"At least I can blame the baby; we went to see aunt Emmera didn't we Jayah?" As the toddler giggled at the memory of the Selesnya elf her mother placed one hand on her stomach and the precious secret it contained as her husband looked at her thunderstruck, "Our family's about to get a little bigger; he'll be summer-born Jace."

There was no hope for his composure; Chandra felt herself pulled forwards and didn't resist, holding him in kind as tears trickled from the corner of his eyes, Jayah with her hands in the hair of both her parents as they celebrated the splendid genesis of her future sibling as the picture began to blur and fade away…

"I hope you've no delusions I did any of that."

"Didn't you? We talked about it later when the others were gone and we realised it, the whole thing staring us all in the face for years and none of us saw it, none of us looked underneath the underneath," Naruto smiled in appreciation of the saying his friend had taken on, "we came close but it wasn't until then it hit us; family. That was behind it all wasn't it; beyond Herotica, beyond even the planesmaking - you brought us together because we were alone."

"It was a major reason," Naruto wasn't going to fight, not today of all days, "the fate commonest between you all, the one I feared most because I'd lived it. I was jinchuuriki before I ascended Jace, I know what it means to have no-one and nothing; the sparks were like your bijuu in a way. They forced you apart from the rest of the Multiverse, strangers wherever you went and fearful of letting people in because you were so different. Even when you did cross paths; unlikely given the Multiverse is a big place even now; you were more likely to fight than talk unless there was a bigger threat looming, a threat I could provide. Don't kid yourself though," the former jinchuuriki warned, "I stand by what I've always said - I cannot create and I rarely destroy. I didn't make your family, any of the families that exist now; I merely gave what was always there a chance, no more than that, and you all did the rest yourselves. Kaguya said it best; oh yes," despite himself he smirked as the mind-mages' looked flabbergasted, "not the first time I've had this conversation - I was there just after Hiringumaru came into the world and we spoke then as she, Gideon and Kiora held their new arrival. She cannot force her seeds to grow, even with mana; she can only scatter them and hope they take root in the soil - that was my hope as well."

"I… in that case I truly meant what I said Naruto," Jaces' voice was serious, as he regarded the smaller human; *forget being a planesmaker, being a jinchuuriki - if he wasn't human he wouldn't care* ; "thank you for that chance."

"Chances given mean nothing if people don't take them," the boy sighed before seemingly regathering himself, "speaking of which

we'd better move; we've been nattering like old men and, well, you might have an excuse but no chance for me."

"Watch it," Jace glowered, still irked that even his daughter was making fun of his first grey hairs; *I blame the Guildmeet - I should have had another decade damn it* ; "just because you never grow up."

"Not true, I age as the Universe does - if all goes well I should pick up a razor a couple of centuries from now," Naruto groused as his eyes became ripples again, a doorway to his home opening up before them, "so then, to Ravnica?"

"You know the place."

"Intimately; still, let's see if you've improved your security at all…"

."..That'd be a no then."

"I could have invited Lavinia back after our meal," Jace pointed out mildly before being accosted by his children, "ah, I wasn't expecting this reception."

"Oh is that so?" Even a being capable of remaking existence shuddered as a menacing silhouette threw him into shadow, "Maybe I can do better - where the hell have you been?"

"Nice to see you too Mrs Beleren," Naruto replied mildly, Chandra trying valiantly to keep her features stern, "and for the record I was entertaining your children until recently, something I'm sure Kurama's been doing since." The fire mage, aged gracefully by the years and the children she'd brought into the world, snorted,

"When does he ever miss a belly-rub?" Sure enough the bijuu was on his side as the Sarkhan twins sat on either side of him, his hind leg kicking as Arabeth snuck him a few nibbles, "Still, glad to see you here." She stooped enough to hug the child, Jace already being

dragged away to officiate a game of dodge-the-creeper as Naruto returned her greeting,

"Glad to be here you big ball of fire."

"I'm smaller than I was; well, for a couple more months," she chortled, patting her slightly swollen midriff as she stood and watched her husband keep an eye on the game, speaking with the other 'walkers as they looked out for their offspring, "thanks for listening, I know he's wanted that off his chest for years."

"Why didn't he years ago? Actually don't answer that," he knew the mind-mage too well, "still not one for talking about his feelings is he? Unlike you; hard to believe you cried more over someone else's' child than you did your own." Chandra went pink, remembering the last time she'd broken down from an unexpected emotional blow before rallying,

"You can't hold that against me, I never saw it coming; nobody did apart from Elspeth and her bloody Vol. And Koth, he had to know, and Nurthu 'cause he can never keep a secret from her, and maybe… okay let's just leave it there," she drew a line before Narutos' grin got any wider, "come on, the little ball of fire's with her mother."

"You should be grateful she cares Chandra," he said in an undertone, nodding left and right as all present realised he was there and gave the greetings from different planes of the Multiverse, "let me guess, if it's a girl you'll…?"

"Oh no, no chance; she made me promise not to."

"At the tip of her sword?"

"At the tips of her fingers," the firebrand remembered with a shudder, "which reminds me I still owe Jace for snitching that'd work. Hey Els, look what the Eldrazi dragged in." The woman who had been talking with Vraska glanced over at her dearest friend, leaving her eldest

son to continue his conversation with the Golgari as she noticed who stood in Chandra's shadow. Smiling she came forth, Naruto bowed in the manner of his home plane and she embraced him when he straightened up,

"A second too late," she told him as she stepped back, a peace about her that had been present since she and Ajani had gathered those of Alaria who would trust them enough to board a sky-ship and set off through chaos to found what she had always sought, a home of her own, "Koth, you still have her?" The Vulshok, the first tinges of rust appearing at the edges of his bristles shook his head but gestured to another who approached them serenely, a small bundle in her arms as Elspeth took her chance to whisper,

"Sarkhan told me what happened; I'm sorry if they were a nuisance but tell me one thing, were you going easy on him? Lasting half a minute against five blades; that's a tall challenge for when I pick my sword up again."

"Not until she's at least a year Elspeth." The knight scowled even as a rough hand found her shoulder, her blooded running a finger across her cheek as she tried not to smile,

"You're just happy I won't show you up," Sarkhan chuckled, drawing her backwards into him as he nodded gratefully towards his friend and the captain who had seen his bloodeds' people returned to a new, safer home, the soratamis' grace not impeded by the little burden she carried with Koth in close attendance,

"Well hopefully by the time you're back in fighting trim I'll have mastered that dance a little better; its original creator uses seven swords and he doesn't have a tail," Naruto had said his home plane would never see him again, not that he wouldn't visit and he did drop by every so often, grateful it was rebuilding itself under the eyes of its kages, "don't tell Kurama but I'm hoping to get it to nine, though for now every time I try adding the sixth I end up cutting half my ear off."

"Ouch," Chandra winced, watching her children trying to fight off the vines a laughing Nissa had tangling around them, "there are two sticky-fingered reasons Jace hasn't worn piercings for years, and there'll soon be a third."

"I am sure Liliana-san will be grateful to hear that," Tamiyo broke in, giving the bundle back to her mother as the shadowmage, a little removed from the celebrations with a hand on the ground, talking to Garruk and Ajani together as even here she sought another toe-length along the path towards recreating her greatest achievement, "it is good to see you Naruto-kun."

"You as well Tamiyo-chan; I'm glad the *Sojourner* still steers true under your steady hands." The moonfolk nodded, the name a slight but welcome pain she would always bear just as the hand-written letter bequeathing the vessel to her would be kept folded close to her heart until the day she joined her friend in the next life; *but that is for later* ; remembering how the artificer had made her smile with his irreverence even in the face of the inevitable she wiped away the pain to hear the knight of Bant and also of Illustria speak as she presented her youngest daughter to the planesmaker,

"Naruto," with the greatest of reverence he held the latest addition to this family, blinking back tears enough to look up and see the assembled clearly, "little Chandrah has heard all about you."

As he saw the black eyes regarding him curiously and ran a finger through the baby's soft, tawny hair the Uzumaki felt his burdens shrived from his back, just for a few hours. As he looked around at the familiar faces he heard the words Chandra Beleren had once said to the woman whose child, named in her honour, he now held echo in the back of his mind, and was at peace…

… *welcome home.*

Card/Technique List:

These are the Magic: the Gathering cards and other terms used in this fanfic; check them out on Gatherer (any search engine will find it) if you want to know more about them:

Sekai no rimeiku no kotan - Nativity of a World Remade (ironically not a card but based off Hashirama's Nativity of a World of Trees because that name's awesome)

Chinmoku - Silence.

Nemurenai no ketsugo - Pillory of the Sleepless (translated as binding of the sleepless to stop my translator melting).

Mu e no tobira - Door to Nothingness

Chijo no ketsugo o kiru - Cut the Earthly Bond

Yochi noryoku - Second Sight

Eko hokai - Echoing Decay

Juko - Muzzle.

Uchikudaku - Shatter.

Memori shinshoku - Memory Erosion.

Kangaerarenai o kaimamiru - Glimpse the Unthinkable.

Heiwa shugi - Pacifism.

Kyoretsuna parusu - Shattering Pulse.

Konagona-arashi - Shatterstorm.

Shi ni taeru - Withstand Death.

Hametsu no ha - Doom Blade

Anbiru no ken - Fists of the Anvil.

Fukkatsu no sanbika - Hymn of Rebirth.

Kage no sakeme - Shadow Rift.

Kurisumasukeki - Christmas Cake (calling a Japanese woman, especially an unmarried one, this is an insult - it means she's not worth as much after her 25th birthday). No prizes for guessing this isn't a card!

Shitagi - Underwear - no prizes for guessing this isn't either!

Inkuaizu - Ink-Eyes.

Shiri no roddoi - Rod of Spanking - yes, this is a real card!

Bonus points for anyone who can guess the card the planeswalkers cast to break Naruto's avatar, and major Brucie bonus points to anyone who can spot the hidden Unhinged card lurking in the story (Hint: One of Naruto's masks alludes to it). Also, for anyone interested, look up the card Splendid Genesis - there was a reason I used that phrase where I did!

And yes, minor bonus points if you can guess where the names of five of Naruto's authors came from, include the pen-name Naruto himself used for his Herotica books!

Casual Cards

For anyone who can or wants to make cards based off this story, here are the rules I came up with for some of the events and masks in this story; I know there are some packages for making MtG cards but my computer's pretty much a typewriter with internet, so it won't run them. The card information is given in the following sequence:

Card Name: **Converted mana cost (1WBGRU (U=blue mana)** :
Card Type: Rules Text (T is the 'tap' symbol): *Flavour Text* :
Power/Toughness (starting loyalty for planeswalkers).

Splay-Paw, Head-hunter: **1BB** : Legendary Creature - Rat Assassin: Haste, First Strike, Protection from planeswalkers. When Splay-Paw enters the battlefield, target opponent puts a Contract counter on a random creature or planeswalker he controls. If attacking, blocking or blocked by a permanent with a Contract counter, Splay-Paw gains deathtouch until end of turn. 1B, pay 2 life: Return Splay-Paw to its owners' hand: **2/2.**

Mel Vynsacher, Brawler-Mage: **1GU** : Legendary Creature: Human Warrior: Protection from green, blue and planeswalkers. You may choose not to untap Mel Vynsacher during your untap step. GU, T: Target opponent chooses a planeswalker they control. That planeswalker cannot use their loyalty abilities and loses a loyalty counter during each of that players' upkeep steps for as long as Mel Vynsacher remains tapped. **2/3** .

J'honee, Calm of the Sea: **1UU** : Legendary Creature: Kor Wizard. Shroud, protection from planeswalkers. UU: Counter target spell or planeswalker ability targeting a creature you control. **1/3**

Timothy, Ancient Explorer: **1WW** . Legendary Creature: Human Duffer. Protection from angels, demons and planeswalkers. 1BW, T: Target opponent shuffles a random Demon, Angel or planeswalker permanent he or she controls into his library unless he or she pays X, where X is the creatures' power or the planeswalkers' remaining loyalty counters. **2/3**

Spikes, Knight of Darksteel: **1GG** . Legendary Creature: Human Knight. Indestructible, trample, protection from planeswalkers. 4X, T: Each opponent sacrifices a permanent with converted mana cost X. X cannot be zero. **2/4.**

Blood Cultist Bomber: **1RR** . Legendary Creature: Human Berserker. Wither, protection from red and planeswalkers. RR, T: Choose target

opponent. Unless that opponent has Blood Cultist Bomber deal 2 damage to him, it deals 3 damage to a random creature or planeswalker that player controls. **2/3** .

Aspect of Annihilation: **2WBGRU** . Legendary Creature: Spirit Avatar. Vigilance, trample. During your upkeep, tap all other creatures you control. Aspect of Annihilation has protection from the colours of all tapped creatures you control. *More than the sum of its parts.* **9/9 .**

First Stone of Pyronia: **1** . Legendary Artefact. When the First Stone of Pyronia comes into play, exile target instant or sorcery card with converted mana cost 1 or less from your graveyard. 2,T: Cast target instant or sorcery card exiled with the First Stone of Pyronia without paying its mana cost.

Hunters' Charm: **1** . Legendary Artefact - Equipment. Equipped creature has banding. Equip cost: 0. *"Many small claws can bring down great prey" - Garruk Wildspeaker.*

Harrowing Decision. **9** . Sorcery . Harrowing Decision cannot be countered. Each player chooses spare or slay. Players who choose spare sacrifice all non-land permanents they control, draw up to their maximum hand size and set their life total to 20. Players who choose slay return all non-land permanents from their graveyard to the battlefield, discard their hand and set their life total to 1. *Dreams and nightmares differ only by what you can live with.*

No! **1** . Instant. Choose target spell. All players other than the spells' owner vote yes or no. If any player votes yes, the spell is cast as normal. If all players vote no, exile that spell and the spells' owner can choose two of the following: gain 3 life, draw a card, put a +1/+1 counter on target creature, deal 2 damage to target player or add B to their mana pool. *"Is that a unanimous negative?"*

Sense the Spark. **0.** Sorcery. Search your library for a planeswalker card and reveal it. You may pay mana equal to the revealed cards' converted mana cost. If you do, put that card into your hand. If you

do not, exile it. *"Distance is no object for those who can step across the Multiverse."*

Snuff the Spark. **X2** . Sorcery . Remove X loyalty counters from target planeswalker. If this reduces the planeswalker to loyalty 0, exile that planeswalker. *"What was given as a gift can be taken as a punishment."*

Worldbreak. **10** . Sorcery . Destroy all non-planeswalker and non-planesmaker permanents. *"What do you mean 'oops'!" Chandra Beleren, on Uzumaki Naruto*

Kaguya, Oboro's Gardener. **GBWU** . Planeswalker - Kaguya. +2: Look at each opponents' hand. -1: Put X 0/1 black and white Plant creature tokens onto the battlefield, where X is Kaguya's remaining loyalty. -7: You gain an emblem with: Plant creatures and saprolings you control gain +X/+X, where X is the number of plant creatures and saprolings you control. **4.**

Tiszta, Light of Mirrodin: **4** . Planeswalker - Tiszta. +1: Until the start of your next turn, the next spell you cast costs 2 less to play. -2: Tiszta deals 1 damage to all creatures with power 3 or less. For each creature dealt damage this way, tap it unless its controller pays 1. -X: Search your library for a planeswalker card with converted mana cost X and put it onto the battlefield. **3.**

Naruto, Planesmaker. **WBGRU** . Planesmaker* - Naruto. 0: Untap all basic lands you control, then put that many loyalty counters on Naruto. 0: Until the beginning of your next turn, non-creature spells or abilities your opponents control cannot cause planeswalkers you control to lose loyalty counters. -X: Search your library for X basic land cards and put them onto the battlefield tapped. -18: From outside the game, search for three cards you own called Emrakul, the Aeons Torn, Ulamog the Infinite Gyre and Kozilek, Butcher of Truth and put them onto the battlefield. Treat these cards as though you'd just played them from your hand. **5.** *Planesmaker is a new permanent type; it follows all the planeswalker rules but is not

affected by cards that specifically target planeswalkers e.g. Dreadbore.

A/N: I've always wanted to do a Naruto/MtG cross, especially as these new planeswalkers had come out as I stopped playing and the MtG story seems to revolve around them now - great! So I logged on and started researching who they were, trying to find a way to fit these colourful characters into a story with a good heart…

… Ho-ly moly; and I thought Sasuke had a reason to be screwed up!

Seriously, apart from maybe *one* exception (Gideon Jura, and even that's debateable) none of the planeswalkers we know the history of has a happy back-story - they all became planeswalkers because of tragedy or loss and even during the ongoing game they get all sorts of unpleasantness hurled at them from every angle (especially Elspeth, she needs a hug damn it!) All of them seemed to be drifters bouncing around the Multiverse and when they finally do find other people who could understand their struggles they just end up fighting for the most part - look at all the X vs Y decks! It's madness, it cannot be healthy for any of them to have all these issues and it needs to be resolved - enter Uzumaki Naruto, master of pranking, the talk jutsu and the healing punch to the face!

Let me know if you thought the Multiverse as I made it was believable, if you liked Naruto's masks and the idea of where the Multiverse came from and what the Eldrazi truly are; I'm looking forwards to the return Zendikar later this year and seeing where the storyline goes after Origins!